Can a foreigner* ever completely understand and embrace a Mexican tradition of crafts and culture that he wasn't born into?

Follow Yama Ploskonka as he tries to do that, precisely, together with The Fantastic Alebrijes de Austin!

A substantial How-To step-by-step guide for you to **make your own alebrijes** is the meaty *torta* filling, in between rather opinionated sections that include a tell-all of his trek to engage art history, STEAM, contemporary politics, environmental protection, arts culture, Mexico City food and street traffic, friendship, an animated movie, the families of craftsmen, prehistoric makers, fireworks, Austin traditions, iconic animals, the plight of the undiscovered artist, making paints, copyrights, niche research, the yearly *Gigantic Alebrije Parade* of Mexico City, bookboards,

plus detailed descriptions and artist statements regarding the three *Alebrijes de Austin!*, *Bato Zopollote*, *Dolpho Duckodillo*, and the controversial, politically-engaged *Pura Boca*, all the while digging deep into *traditional* and *modern* alebrijes, and the more ancient craft of **cartonería**.

* *gaijin, estron, alien, gringo*. How come we have so many words for the stranger among us? When we can do so much better, knowing and loving each other as brothers, instead…

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The Fantastic Alebrijes de Austin! Ploskonka

The Fantastic
Alebrijes de Austin!

a very personal quest for classic tradition among weird cartonería *sculpture*

Yama
Ploskonka

aPapercraftBridgeBook

alebrije
(*ah-leh-BREE-heh*)

Yama Ploskonka

Papermaker in Austin, Texas, since 2016

The Fantastic
Alebrijes de Austin!

a very personal quest for
classic tradition among weird
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in Austin, Texas

to the cutest, most whimsical creature,
my Hollywood blonde; mi Osita
de su Oso

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Some kind of introduction

When I got started, this book was just a booklet, with two simple goals, both to be achieved within 30 pages, max.

One, a how-to, with a plain retelling of my rediscovery and sharing of *cartonería*. Two, a few anecdotes about Pedro Linares, the creator of the original *Alebrijes*.

However, an unexpected pattern of ideas and concepts began taking over as soon as my hands recalled their *cartonería* experience. Some of these were rather vocal in wanting their own tales to be told: the plight of disappearing crafts became most assertive, often got its way.

Circumstances and current events also called for attention. Especially the widely ignored Chiquitanía slash-and-burn environmental catastrophe of 2019, bound to be repeated; again and again. And, while I kept working on the book and my own alebrijes, the people of Bolivia united in protest like nothing I ever saw, bound together in a common goal against the massive and then violent electoral fraud attempt initiated by the handlers of that first-ever Native American president of a country.

As I finally lay down pen and keyboard, we end up with something that is perhaps both less and more than what I had intended initially.

This ended up being a very personal book. Opinionated, intensely so at times. It is meant to share my experience and thoughts as I go into my journey. You are being warned, at the same time that you are invited to share something more intimate than your usual *crafts book*.

Yes, the how-to, and the Linares bits are here, but the single-minded focus is lost, at least for now.

An improvement perhaps: this way we encounter together heaps of context, among which I attach the highest value to the concept that the modern *cartonería judas,* or even the *alebrije,* makes sense *especially* if linked with the events of life, being a folk art form that is *its time, its place, and its people*. Therefore, while art for art's sake can be good, it is art that connects the puny works of man and the majestic happenings of Creation the way true art should stand up on its own. Disconnected art is valid also, I guess, no discrimination intended here. As a colleague well said while speaking in earnest, *in art, anything goes…*

As scope-creep moved *altius et fortius*[1], the manuscript itself also sought to climb socially, not just remain proletarian talk but even acquire some academic credentials. That would mean at least footnotes. A proper bibliography. References.

I didn't go for it. But it's all right this way, too.

In some places, well researched, not ordinary scholarship shows up its freshly shaven face, guesses got educated, no longer wild but well-behaved and sober.

Some meaningful, independent arguments toward environmentally and socially sustainable *crafts in this time and age* make an appearance or two. As a recurring *lied*, musings regarding fine art *versus* folk art *versus* craft.

You might also learn here about some events and facts that so far had escaped English-language documentation and reporting but are known to Spanish-speaking chroniclers more connected with Latino culture.

Moreover, while honoring Pedro Linares as the admired original author of Alebrijes, I do make quite a definite effort to present *cartonería* as the valuable yet anonymous craft it is, embedded within community life, in the roll of seasons. Anonymity in crafts has an unsettling allure that I'd like to encourage y'all to seek.
And hopefully even hear back from you, perhaps.

So there, dig in.

Yama Ploskonka
cartonero eventual

Austin, Texas, September of 2020

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[1] *higher and stronger,* part of the Olympic motto. That's all the footnotes you get, folks...

Updates, corrections, links, extra pictures, videos and additions to this book can be found in the website *papeltexano.org/alebrijes*

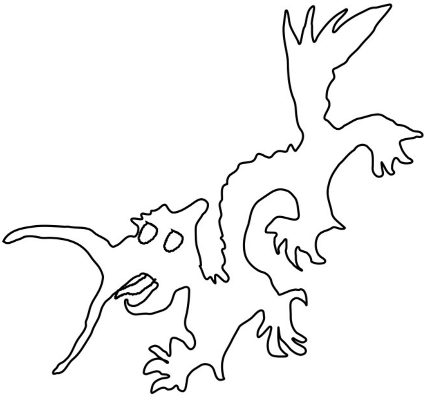
Iconic context of Alebrijes in Culture

A national icon?

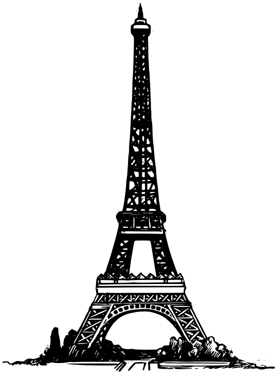
A national icon is ***that*** *something* that just a look at will recall into our brains a whole country, its people, its culture…

Yes, reductionist. Labeling, profiling, stereotyping. All bad. But human brain works that way. Sigh.

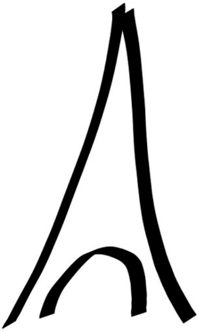
Let’s try a little experiment.



Especially if in eye-popping bright vermilion red, a wingless dragon *is* China, and has been so for centuries, if yellow then. Just like The Eagle *is* USA, The Bear sort of Russia if not Berlin.



This iconic image right here is so totally attached to a certain country, we can even turn it into just three lines...



...and the brain still registers *France* right away.

The time has come now to go visit a national icon that might not be *so* famous or familiar as those.

Fantastic Beasts

Waaaay before they became a franchise with weak storyline chasing after the movie money of *Harry Potter* fans, fantastic creatures were a well-established part of art and tradition pretty much everywhere. By *fantastic,* we mean something misshapen, unnatural, a figment of imagination, even part of scary campfire story thrills.

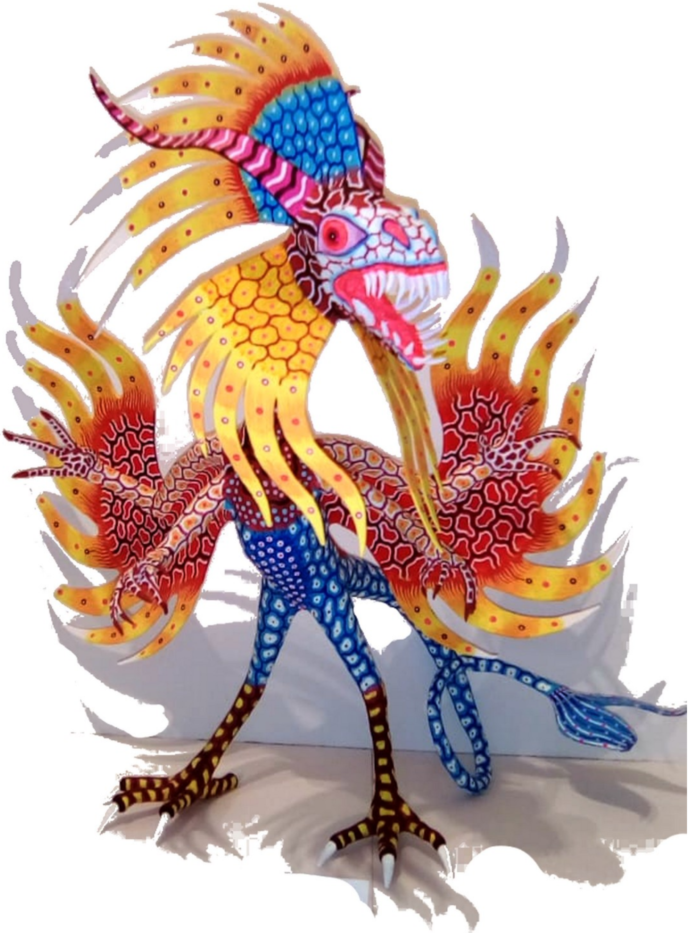
Fantasy. Not real.

A red *winged* dragon will recall *Cymru*, Wales to the *estron* among you. Tarascas are well established in France. Sphinx, basilisks, gryphons… You get the idea.

Now, a many-colored lion with bat wings and eagle claws? What about a long-tailed reptile standing up on two feet, with long teeth, feather wings, also of many colors? (*Many colors* seem to play a role here, more than the shape of the beast itself, do pay attention!)

To cultural aficionados everywhere, such a bright, garishly colored, fantastic creature *is* Mexico.

So much so, that when the Disney corporation tried to trademark *Dia de los Muertos*, that unholy massive media investment/lobbying entity was fixin' to corner the market of *cultura*, for a *delightful* (you must concede them that) animated film where whimsical, fantastic creatures of many colors are one of the main features, though their role is wildly off their original meaning.



Contemporary *Alebrije* by Ricardo Linares Gracia, alebrijero in Mexico City, a grandson of Pedro Linares. Meet Ricardo, his family and his alebrijes later in the book.
Photo by Ricardo Linares.

Disney well knows that their attempt to stereotype further, take over, monetize, exploit the essence of Mexican culture needed *alebrijes* besides the expected usual tropes of outsized sombreros, guitar music and fiesta.

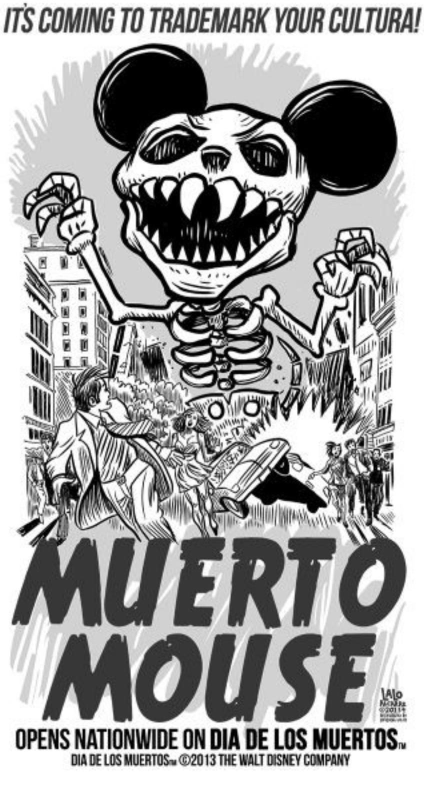
Lalo Alcaraz, author of a poster protesting that *coming to trademark your cultura!* (see next page), was soon hired by Disney as a consultant, for this rather nice movie, *Coco,* impressive cinematic animation work!

However, the film has so much of the usual stereotypes that any expectations of accuracy regarding actual cultural traditions is overwhelmed, but you can’t have it all when you’re printing money, right? Right.

And, of course, no one would build their views and biases about what some foreign culture and traditions are really like, merely out of an animated movie. Especially not kids. Good to know that the children are safe!

Things ended up sort of OK, I guess, at least for this small detail. Disney Corp. “Dia de Los Muertos” application 85920880 for trademark was *abandoned because the applicant filed an express abandonment*, as the USPTO.gov says.

Interesting thoughts come when reflecting on how early a given icon has existed or been accepted as such, and whether you can determine its true origins, perhaps even the original creative authorship.


IT'S COMING TO TRADEMARK YOUR CULTURA!
MUERTO MOUSE
LALO ALCARAZ ©2013
OPENS NATIONWIDE ON DIA DE LOS MUERTOS™
DIA DE LOS MUERTOS™ ©2013 THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY

Lalo Alcaraz 2013 Muerto Mouse, reproduced here as a fair use, low resolution black and white image.
Autographed, color prints might still be available at lalo-alcaraz-art-shop.myshopify.com/products/muerto-mouse-print
Do follow up with Lalo, sometimes it takes him a while to ship. Worth it.

Iconic dragons have been around long before that socialist people's republic got quite good at creating more inequality between the very rich and the very poor, than even we seem able to achieve.

For the Eiffel Tower, of course it is that team of engineers organized by an amazing entrepreneur, innovator and businessman, Gustave Eiffel, over 125 years ago. The Bald Eagle emblem was the result of committee decision-making, with the legendary famous dissent by Benjamin Franklin. It appears that he wanted us to take up the turkey for our national symbol and inspiration. Don't dismiss him, his letters had some insights.

Something interesting to note here: among those people who identify Mexico with brightly painted, fantastic *alebrijes*, and not everybody does, whether indeed they know that word or not, many do assume that these multicolored creatures have been around since a long time ago, as part of established popular culture.

Some might even believe that Mexicans *themselves* feel that *alebrijes* are an iconic, traditional expression of their own culture.

While this latter, whether Mexicans identify themselves with *alebrijes,* is a solid *sometimes*, the former, that being, how *classic* and ancient alebrijes *are,* is a definite negative. These colorful beasts are quite recent.

It is *one of those things* that, there being today assumptions regarding an ancient, traditional origin for *alebrijes*, many people don’t pay any longer attention to the facts of the matter. *Meaning* has no longer the value of what was and is true, *canon* becomes whatever is the current mainstream interpretation, even if it is wrong.

The origin of alebrijes happens to be a one-man creation. Less than 60 or so years have passed, a mere couple generations, from the time certain events took place, when some people started paying serious attention to these creatures, and to their inventor.

Being that recent, if nationals and foreigners feel that alebrijes inherently represent Mexico, it is all the more an honor for that skilled artisan but otherwise quite a simple man and his family team, not that different from millions other craftsmen in Mexico. Just an artisan, a *judero*, a maker of *cartón piedra* figures.

Better than Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and many other bigger and more famous names than his, unintentionally, which is perhaps the best way, in fact he gave his people and his nation a vibrant, distinctive, colorful *iconic cultural expression* forever, one that keeps inspiring the rest of the world also, that today attracts tens of thousands of his people to celebrate together in massive Mexico City parades.

Out of a nightmare, no less.

Pedro Linares, *judero*

When don Pedro Linares’ name had to show up in any official paperwork, he likely would have been listed as *Pedro Linares López, judero*, or perhaps it would say *cartonero de oficio* after his name. This matters, because his lifework was, indeed, to make *judas* figures out of *cartonería*.

Let me explain. The United States might be rather unique in just listing name, address, and date of birth in government-issued identification.

Elsewhere, you are what your papers say you are, and you better stay put. Religion, gender, married status, this latter called *estado civil* in Spanish, remarking how much it matters there, age, ethnic heritage? Profession or trade? All duly recorded. This intense labeling is meant to box in, control, limit class movement and freedom, all of that totally by accident on purpose.

For married women, their ID over there will often say *labores*, that is, *chores*, meaning homemaker, no profession nor expected income. Males with no established trade or certified training or degree will instead get *empleado*, or *obrero*, or *peon*, marking them either as white-collar, or else a journeyman.

It’s not trivial to get something classier to be officially affixed next to your name, and it does matter a lot.

Mine said *periodista*, journalist, for quite a while, served me well, kept some doors from closing.

Pedro Linares had a trade. Not a nobody *obrero*, he was a *cartonero de oficio*, or at least a *judero*.

Cartonería is hard work. Certainly, better than being a landless, migrant peasant, which was the lot of many of his cohorts in 20th century Mexico City, and still today. But not much better. Even the respectful *don* honorific title came with age, rather than from fancy breeding or mucho money. No patrician, but instead having an actual, real trade and being good at it, he earned respect from his guild, and a *role in society.*

That role had a lot to do with the concept of the fiesta. I do not care much about the anthropology of the fiesta; it's analyzed again and again by PhD candidates cleverly having a good time on grant money when lucky that way. I'll just go for some practicalities about *fireworks*.

Fiesta fireworks are built on *castillos*, castles, structures decorated with *cartonería* pieces that burn as part of the celebration. We are told that Pedro also knew his fireworks like a pro, but that he didn't want this better paid trade for his children, preferring the much safer *cartonería* as the family's business.

This choice got vindicated in a rather intense manner when the godfather of one of his sons died young from the results of a fireworks accident.

Important note: the *castillo cartonería* pieces were made to burn, to be destroyed. These were not something for people to lovingly save in collections, or for museums to display.

Consumable, utilitarian, temporary decoration, by its very design *ephemeral*, such *cartonería* of popular tradition was seen for a day; then gone forever.

Other *cartonería* didn't fare much better: toys, skeletons for Día de los Muertos. Specifically, the judas figures existed solely to be burned on Holy Saturday morning, before Easter. None of those had a higher rating in the Mexican "cultural consciousness" than would have, say, a piece of bread, a chair, a spoon, or a kitchen knife.

Yes, my sister can wax lyrical about a most perfect *marraqueta*, an utterly excellent kind of Bolivian bread, superlative even when ordinary. Museums will collect certain chairs, cutlery, even shoes. To the rest of us, those are commodities to be used until worn out, perhaps kept around in the hopes of resurrection or repair, but eventually discarded and forgotten. A *cartonería* toy doesn't last long, even if precious to a child who will save it for years, even broken. I should know.

The cartonero of popular tradition makes *consumable* things, not *beautiful* things. Yes, that distinction often is confusing or outright misleading, but let me try to make a point here.

Some might be both, a *beautiful consumable*, but not that often, as a cartonero cannot afford to put much extra work to decorate something that he will be selling with very little profit. *Cartonería* was certainly nothing *valuable,* not like *real art.*

Then already quite famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera might collect, then portray some pieces of *cartonería* in costly canvas in the early 1950s, like he would paint some trees, or a house, but that did not elevate or make *cartonería* itself *become* art.

Until.

Until there was such a horrid accident in 1957 when a dynamite warehouse blew up, leaving several dead, that the government of Mexico outlawed all fireworks, amid confusing circumstances.

Because cartoneros made their best profit out of fireworks castillo displays for fiestas, this ban was a personal income and livelihood disaster to many.

It just so happened that, sort of inspired by an extremely bad dream many years before, Pedro Linares lately had been making a few rather peculiar *judas*-like figures, but these didn't sell well. Too different. Too *ugly* to the taste of the usual consumers of *cartonería* fare.

Extra limbs and parts. Bright colors. Fantastic.

Little did he know that such variations would result eventually in him being declared an *artist*.

The *alebrijes* legend, and some not too pesky facts

Years later, Pedro Linares would share a story that his excited visitors relished to hear in person. It was about that time when, extremely sick, he was in a coma, hallucinating.

He told about how, in that dreamlike state, he was chased by these *feas, muy feas* (ugly, very ugly) creatures with demon-like eyes. They were yelling, *¡alebrijes!*, *¡alebrijes!*, in ear-splitting bedlam, while trying to eat him. *A donkey with wings and a tongue of fire, a serpent with rooster feet and hair instead of scales, a lion with the head of a dog and a dragon's tail*, he told later, when a more eager public paid better for some cartonería versions of such fantastic beasts than it was usual to spend on a common *judas*.

It's a good story. And we might want to leave things that way. Many people and the internet have assorted variants, some of those even turning alebrijes into harbingers of peace and comfort, which obviously makes no sense.

I wish I could just move on. Can't. But probably should!

Alas, I have sought some who have studied these matters much deeper. It might seem that even the origin of the word *alebrijes* itself is disputed.

Fantastic misbegotten creatures might not have been entirely unknown in Mexico prior to Pedro making his. Assorted other such party-popping factoids, unfriendly anecdotes or academic data shows up if you dig for dirt.

Seriously?

Would you *really* try to prove to a kid that the Tooth Fairy is something that we only believe in when we are too young?

No, you shouldn’t, because our prosperous, rich USA economy, where less and less of anything with any practical or useful value is *made*, depends on everybody holding hands and chanting together in unison, *I believe in fairies.*

You don’t want to be the one to break this vital kayfabe, do you?

Back to Pedro and his dream and his alebrijes: to me, and it should be that way to *you* also, it doesn’t really matter how *accurate* his story is. A good story is worth its weight in Washington cherry tree hatchets, despite those who, even among his family, are lately telling it different.

It might bring some comfort to know that, instead of eating him, eventually alebrijes provided for him and his kin, and even fed him well...

Guardian spirit or nasty monster?

There is little doubt that, for Pedro Linares, *the* inventor of Alebrijes, these creatures were nasty, monstrous. The story of his dream is well known.
A pet peeve of mine: for some strange reason, alebrijes are often presented today as guardian spirits? I know about revisionist history, but this makes even less sense!

It so happens that a First Nation in the Oaxaca valley, the Zapotecs, held a belief in what they called *tonás*. In a tradition involving wood ash and animals footprints, a newly born baby is assigned a specific animal as his "guardian" creature.
Hundreds of years pass. Manuel Jiménez is a wood carver in Oaxaca. He brings back home one of Pedro Linares' alebrijes. Somehow, in a story that deserves to be told in detail after proper research, Jiménez' carvings are now painted in bright colors, sold as having a "friendly spirit meaning," perhaps connected to the *tonás* in some way?, and are named *alebrijes*. All this is widely copied by other carvers in Oaxaca. Tourists love it, curators too. I owe it to my newest BFF, César from *paintyouralebrije.com* for helping me understand these things, right as I was finishing this book.

It so happens that Pedro Linares and his successors have tried to keep some sort of exclusive ownership over the name *alebrijes*, and I guess that was somewhat fair.

Even if the dream story perhaps is not 100% accurate, it is clear and evident that *the word* became established through their work. A true *trademark*. But then, what about the hundreds, thousands other artisans also making something that *they* call alebrijes? Do they not deserve some chance to earn a little better too? While perhaps there was no intention to deceive, those lacking knowledge of art history have made things confusing.

Regarding *intellectual property* issues, cartoneros tend to be rather guarded about their own techniques. This is something I do generally respect and celebrate, all the while wondering about how a craftsman's knowledge is essentially lost forever after he passes, and whether that matters or not. Not my own approach, but then, I am privileged to have a *choice* when it comes to sharing.

Regarding the *alebrijes* trademark: eventually a moot point. In some sort of compromise, Mexico law now requires the region of origin of any craft piece for sale to be declared, while the word *alebrijes* itself became common use, under protest by the Linares, and to the relief of the carvers of Oaxaca and elsewhere.

Not being subject to Mexico law, I find it still kind of cool to attach the name of my hometown to my work, as it were a *Designation of Origin* fancy wine.

Alebrijes de Austin! Forward, march!

En Calavera

It might be my ignorance, but I am under the impression that Susan N. Masuoka's lavishly illustrated *En Calavera*, published in 1994, is perhaps *the* ultimate reference in English regarding Pedro Linares, his work, trajectory, the events surrounding his life, even covering Mexican *cartonería* pretty well. As I started this one in your hands, hers was perhaps the first book in our language dedicated to this subject, and the only one for 25 years.

Of course, it was not my only source, but often either Mrs. Masuoka's tome confirms other accounts, or, when studying divergent views, her information helps figure what makes better sense, even if not always accurate. I also noticed a couple unexpected absences in her academic-tone account, perhaps on purpose.

En Calavera is easy enough to read, but no trivial volume. Not a *catalogue raisonné*, it does yet follow the work of Pedro Linares and his family for many years, carefully covering meaningful events and context, and resulting artwork, with some gaps regarding attribution of some pieces, and too few dates for the pieces portrayed to be able to study their evolution in style. I do dislike the plural form the author used, *Linareses,* but that's me. Masuoka is radically critical and exhaustive in dissecting the well-established legends, looking for facts, something that I am much grateful for.

While mostly factual, more than once I had to wince at the few instances that sounded to me almost like pushing ideology or even bias, while the scientist side of my brain extolled in those precise and easily verifiable events that are close to true Truth, aplenty to be found there. Some delicate matters are handled delicately, with elegance, between the lines...

Sigh. I have learned much.

For example, that an arts exhibit deserves a book.
And, that I still have much more to learn.

En Calavera's 176 pages and as many color photos accompanied a grand, major exhibit of Linares' work at the Fowler Museum / UCLA, scheduled five years or more in advance. Too late for Don Pedro, who passed away before the exhibit opened.

We are told that he had specifically prepared for that eventuality, in which case he still would be attending the exhibit, but "*en calavera*", that meaning, in the form of a *cartonería* skeleton. And so, he did. The apparently chronologically inaccurate but still quite poignant story can be found in page viii of *En Calavera*.

My book, originally a mere pamphlet, was for just three *Alebrijes of Austin!*, in a collective exhibit here, at the Central Library of Austin.

Quite a difference…

The 1975 documentary

I guess we can dispute until the cows come home, whatever that idiom means, about the role of outsiders, foreigners, in the demise of tradition among folk cultures and crafts, or their twisted and compromised survival.

Fact: traditional crafts tend to be unappreciated locally beyond their role of a mere fungible *commodity*.

Fact: some international galleries and collectors of *art naïf* can get greedy and have some sort of vested interest in keeping gifted craftsmen unknown and uncelebrated, cheaper that way?

Galleries greedy? Who would have thought it?

Another fact: a certain Judith Bronowski would have nothing of this nonsense. Evidence shows that she meant it, when she set out to call international attention and attach a *person* to several otherwise ignored and anonymous Mexican crafts. Bronowski made several documentaries, showing the work and thoughts of Sabina Sanchez, *artesana bordadora* (embroidery), Manuel Jiménez, *artesano de madera* (wood carving), Marcelo Ramos, *artesano pirotécnic*o (fireworks), besides our friend Pedro Linares, *artesano de cartón*.

You can find Pedro’s as a bootleg VHS in YouTube (see *sources*, at the end), others seem unavailable.

Copyright is not a victimless crime. Culture suffers. What has no longer a for-profit value is lost forever.

In my opinion, that documentary is a rather masterful example of socially engaged, factual and artistic expression of that era. It was made about the same year that I was trying not to forget my lines in front of TV cameras while learning some *cartonería*, far, far away.

A question that haunts me, was it *fair*? What I mean is, was it fair that Pedro Linares was *chosen*, singled out for fame, among hundreds of hard-working cartoneros? That he thus gained a little bit of extra life comforts, while the rest were still as unknown and poor and expendable as before?

I dare say, *it was better than the alternative*. For one thing, he truly was a *master*. If you're going to portray a craft, you better get yourself one of those to play the leading role, more about that later. For another, there's the principle that, if you can't help everybody, at least do help as many as you can, don't just give up altogether. Judith Bronowski never gave up, even in 2019 she was helping the next generation of Linares find opportunities, travel, be recognized.

Then, another principle, this one I take to heart, as I share freely my innovations for making paper by hand: if *you* win, *we all win*. Anybody helping to revive the broken crafts ecosystem is not a competitor, but an ally.

The first cartonero to be celebrated as an artist means that other cartoneros can *become*, also. Being an *artist* is not that much easier, but can, perhaps, deliver a better livelihood than staying a lower class *cartonero*.

That some people today are unaware or keep silent about Pedro Linares’ pioneer role I see as almost as a compliment. In the original Boy Scout Law, a good citizen *helps others without thinking of compensation*.

Though it is unclear how available the documentary ever was, thanks to the Bronowski film cartonería became more visible, more opportunities opened up for all cartoneros, essentially “undiscovered” until then, at the very moment when other events helped also to make their work be seen as valuable, collectible.

Watch that film, see *Sources* at the end of the book.

If you’re anything like me, your heart softens as the camera, almost as an aside, shows youngsters taking up proud ownership of the craft. And that cute detail of the painting brushes made with the household cats’ hair…

How cartonería means making, and selling; how it is fully enmeshed with community life as the cartonero walks the streets with a heavy load of judas, sold for a few pesos each. How a family works together.

Totally awesome. Do watch it!

The ways to fame

Masuoka lists several events that led to Pedro getting discovered, often providing much useful detail and socio-cultural context. I find fascinating her meaningful insights, on page 123 of *En Calavera*, regarding the very precise location where anthropologist Pareyón first purchased some early alebrijes, and other patronage that took place and resulted in Pedro's recognition as an artist. Interestingly, she mentions Bronowski only once, listing a wrong date for the film?

Market research describes the value of branding and name recognition. An artist name, a *signature*, even though Pedro Linares seldom signed his pieces.

Fame is finicky, meaning, circumstances play a role, luck rules. Fame brings better times for the craftsman, sorry, *artist*, as long as it lasts. A less painful way to make a living now might release inspiration and creativity that was bottled up, lost during all that time when the craftsman made low-profit, cheap products for an undiscriminating, indifferent, lower class public. Mere survival might now give way to thriving creativity, success.

Within everything else, the Linares have become indeed sort of brand name in the *cartonería* field. It didn't happen in one day, or just because their work was extraordinary. Things all had to add up.

Mexican Cartonería,

Paper, Paste and Fiesta

In November 2019 Leigh Ann Thelmadatter published an English/Spanish bilingual book with that title, as far as I know the very first ever dedicated *specifically* to cartonería in English.

That happened while I thought I was giving the last touches to my own manuscript for this book…

It had been 25 years since Masuoka's, which did cover the subject of *cartonería* to a good extent, but, being so especially focused on Pedro Linares, barely mentioned other cartoneros.

Thelmadatter's book makes a huge effort to report on as many contemporary cartoneros as she can. Quality color photographs abound among the 192 pages of pleasant and informative bilingual prose.

Naturally, I became concerned that, compared, my own work would become irrelevant. Then, as I read her book cover to cover, I found that even though obviously we both do report on several of the same events and artists, our approach to the matter is radically different.

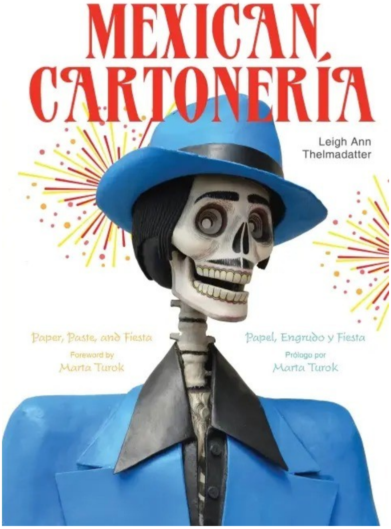
I have an emphasis on *process,* and *my own* personal experience as a cartonero; I do mention those cartoneros that I have crossed paths with, but do not attempt any of the exhaustive detail and wide geographic and gender-coverage that Thelmadatter achieves.

A resource that had been missing for too long, valuable to the collector or institutional buyer, and all those who love this craft.

For example, until I read her book, I was totally ignorant about Argentinian-Mexican cartonera Susana Buyo, and several other professionals highly regarded there.

The main difference is perhaps that *I am* a cartonero telling things from *my first-person perspective*, while Thelmadatter is a most excellent and thorough reporter of other people's work.

Just the pictures would make her book *necessary* to anyone who cares about *cartonería*, and it's so much more!


MEXICAN CARTONERÍA
Leigh Ann Thelmadatter
Paper, Paste, and Fiesta
Foreword by Marta Turok
Papel, Engrudo y Fiesta
Prólogo por Marta Turok

The cartonero ecosystem

To me there is a rather vital concept, one often lost in normal recounting: *a craft does not exist in a vacuum*. Certainly, craftsmen need buyers, but it's more complex than that. Just like it is regarding the survival of an ecosystem, sustainability in the existence of a craft tends to require sort of dynamic balance and flow between many elements. Interdependence.

There is the cartonero. Then, his family; cartoneros have tended to be male, but often, especially close to a major feast or event, it's all hands on deck, including women, children, neighbors. In October of 2019, even *that* pushy Austinite-Bolivian-Uruguayan-Czech made himself available, even a little bit useful.

Speaking of, the calendar of events for which people wanted *cartonería* was not unlike the seasons and the rain is for a prairie. Somewhat reliable, with variations, all life depends on it. Changing, with fashion, even by law. Which reminds us of the *cueteros*, the makers of fireworks. Then the *padrinos*, the wealthy patrons for more expensive castillos and largest *judas* for fireworks celebrations, can they afford the expense this year?

Even technology plays a part. Cellphones killed the fancy Christmas season photo backdrops made of *cartonería*, there is no call anymore for photographers by the nooks of El Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City, waiting for families to come have a picture with their kids. Then the internet, which might bring in new clientele, or get you into mucho trouble. And so much more. A complex ecosystem, it is.

Consider how, with fewer full-time cartoneros now, only thrive those who do the more elegant work, more expensive, commercial, more artistic perhaps...

Then, in a vicious circle, prettier *judas* become too dear to burn. No longer an ephemeral object, not burning it makes its yearly replacement an unnecessary expense.

Fewer, more costly, too-pretty-to-burn *judas* get sold, simpler ones are seldom to be found now. Fewer cartoneros get to make a living, even if prices per unit seem to be going up.

Several new events might be helping to turn things around, perhaps. Since 2018, there is a National Encounter of Cartoneros, and also the *Presea Pedro Linares Lopez,* a very open and transparent contest for alebrijeros worldwide. Besides, of course, the late October humongous, crazy big *Desfile de Alebrijes Monumentales,* organized by the Museo de Arte Popular since 2006. And quite a few more.

What helps refresh the craft, keeps it alive. Somewhat, not like before. Transformed. But at least alive...?

The dwindling cartoneros

Just like in my own craft, paper making, *cartonería* was an occupation to many, for generations, before machine-made industry took over. Plastic toys killed *juguetes* made of *cartón piedra*. Change in customs did away with most plain *judas*, though I was told that you might still find some, right before Easter, in the Mercado.

It is even possible that the success of *alebrijes* is now encouraging those artisans considering *cartonería* to just bypass the lower class *judas*, and directly aim for these better valued fantastic beasts.

Following successive ruptures in the ecosystem, the traditional *cartonería* feeding the Distrito Federal, Mexico City, the biggest market, was reported to be already going down by the 1980s. Whatever survives now perhaps works a tiny public of old-timers, when it hasn't transmogrified into art or tourist products.
Worse, *alebrijes* are too often understood today to be always of carved wood, fully ignoring *cartonería* itself...

Even many US museum curators of Mexican folk art, quite familiar with the beautiful and friendly Oaxaca copal wood pieces, are not so much, if at all, acquainted with Pedro Linares, or *cartón piedra* fantastic alebrijes, or the vast world of *cartonería* objects and their multiple connections with Mexican culture. That makes it harder for a cartonero to be taken seriously.

Doña Carmen, Don Alfonso

Like two bookends enclosing a tale and history, let me introduce to you two masterful cartoneros of note.

Diego Rivera highly praised Doña Carmen Caballero Sevilla, whose *judas* he included in several paintings in the mid to late 1950s. Doña Carmen worked *hard,* not flashy, or controversial, like some see Frida Kahlo did.

Quiet hard work happens to be less interesting to the bohemian conventional art milieu, anywhere and at any time, more intent in copying tropes and memes of bourgeois bohemians pretending.

Humble and poor, Doña Carmen is loved and cherished by the extraordinary art historian, but otherwise mostly forgotten today.

Then, while I was in the stage of doing serious due diligence for this book, the name of Alfonso Morales kept coming up all over as a much respected contemporary cartonero. Providentially it so happened that I met him in person at the *Desfile de Alebrijes Monumentales* and was able to purchase a small alebrije from him, so much more a privilege to get one unpainted.

By his signature known as *Almorales,* this master artist-artisan practices and teaches today the finest skills in contemporary *cartonería,* together with intense community engagement near the town of Morelos.

Visiting Ricardo Linares and the Gigantic Alebrijes Parade

Since 2006, on a Saturday in late October, a week or so before Día de los Muertos, tens of thousands of enthusiastic spectators line up along the route for the early afternoon *Desfile de Alebrijes Monumentales*, the Parade of Monumental Alebrijes in Mexico City.

Not knowing about it at the time, by a happy coincidence I had scheduled several months before for that very week a trip to San Pablito, Mexico, the world capital of *amate*, paper made by Mayans and Aztecs way before Europeans had any. I would then be able to attend the Parade also, in passing. Not just *attend*, no no no, have you ever seen Yama do anything halfway? (let's not talk right now about cleaning the garage, Deb, I'm here trying to make a *rhetorical* point!)

Closer to my trip, I scheduled to visit some members of the Linares family, on my arrival to in Mexico City. These new circumstances I had just learned about would allow me to see them in *action!* Well… what can this wannabee alebrijero do? (big, big, BIG grin)

So, right from the airport, I show up at Oriente 30, Nº 251, Ricardo Linares' workshop. The internet had said that Ricardo lets neighbors help with his larger events, so I had high hopes that I could just blend in.

Little did I know...

Friday evening, the big event the next day, there was no more actual *cartonería* to make, mostly "just" the chance to hold the ladder for that master cartonero and alebrije artist with international reputation, as he and his team do the finishing touches to the paint of two gigantic pieces. Here and there I try to help with anything I can, trying not to overstep, but definitely taking it all in.

As the evening turned into night, I was fed generously by his family, chatting with all, making friends, feeling *extremely* welcome. Now I have gained a dangerous yearning for sweet plantains with thick cream, a true *boccato di cardinale*, as we say in Spanish.

They were kind and tolerant when looking at pictures of *my* own puny alebrijes. We got to correct my copy of *En Calavera*, as they pointed out some misattributed works. Then, we loaded the huge alebrijes into platforms with wheels, because there was going to be a midnight local event where these would be shown.

This turned out to be the naming of the little square nearby as *Plaza de los Alebrijes*, to honor the legacy of Pedro Linares. There was the Mayor of the Venustiano Carranza neighborhood, and his staff, and quite a few of the extended Linares clan, several of them alebrijeros of international note in their own right. Therefore, also at least a half dozen enormous alebrijes on hand-pulled carts had responded to the call, already prepped for the main Saturday city parade downtown the next day. And people. Lots of people. Not quite a full-blown *fiesta*, but surprisingly noisy fireworks, and this being 2019, a drone recording video from above. No alcohol; good.

Then we went back home, to Ricardo's I mean, three blocks away. Then we sat down. And chatted. Had some more snacks. Was it, like, way past midnight already? It's starting to rain, gently. Ricardo gets large plastic sheets. We voice some concern about the two just varnished alebrijes attaching to the plastic, as we cover them carefully. By now most neighbors had left, I was feeling better about me being less of a nuisance and more like actual useful help, but also thinking about where I would spend the night, because we were just there, chatting, indeed well past midnight…

As time passes further, and I got to figure things, the gigantic alebrijes were due to go to El Zocalo, Mexico City's main square, the starting point of the parade. Tonight. They're going to be pull them there, later.

Pull them. Tonight. Do I want to come along?
What? Oh, frabjous adventure!

Meanwhile, I ask about accommodations for myself. Ricardo makes arrangements that I stay at a nearby renovated hotel, which worked fine later, because it turns out that, for now, we were not done, not at all.

See? Gigantic alebrijes might not be welcome just like that in the busy Mexico City streets. To get to El Zocalo, the wait had been for the time of the very least traffic in the streets. No truck available, if you must ask.

Rain went away. Then it came back. HARD.

Sometime after 2 AM we get into two vans, back lift gate open. As I grab one side of the cart shaft handle for Ricardo's alebrije, *El Vigilante Nocturno,* one of Ricardo's helpers gets the other side. The following van, with Ricardo driving, pulls *Agualixe Alebrijado,* work by a team led by Victor Antonio Salcedo Galindo, Ricardo's apprentice. I wish I had pictures. This was thoroughly insane, and I don't normally condone insane.

Grin.

No pictures because it rained so hard, quite hard, and anyway I had both hands busy, between pulling the cart with one, the other keeping me inside the van… Victor drove carefully, but it was a long, a long road to the *mero centro* of Mexico City, while it thoroughly and completely rained and rained…

Exhilarating. Probably will never do something like this again nor should. But at least, once, yay!

Eventually we were in El Zocalo. A gigantic mess of gigantic alebrijes all over the place, getting triaged into position, while it keeps raining, maybe a little less now?

Once delivery is done, Victor drops me at my hotel. Soaked, I promptly pass out beyond all exhaustion.

It’s almost noon, Saturday. After leaving my luggage at the bus station for my trip to Pahuatlán, I now make my way back to El Zocalo inside a crowded Metro subway car, which pretty much empties as it arrives there. Is it that *everyone* is going to the Parade?

With firm step I climb the stairs into El Zocalo, again amazed at the sights, all too aware that it had been 40 years since that time I had been here, with my Mom.

Flashback. In 1989, Bolivian artist Yolanda Rivas de Ploskonka did climb these very same steps, with me. Her dream had always been to visit Mexico City, and Japan also. Japan she never got to, but my parents saved enough to have her take my 15-year-old lanky self to Mexico, a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Oh, we had fun!

Yes, I know, this trip I am supposed to travel to Pahuatlán early in the afternoon. Early, because no idea about hotels there except one where every American blogger seems to have stayed, perhaps too expensive…

I say to myself, “*I’ll be here at the parade just a few minutes, shoot some pictures, video, then go...*”

So, 4 hours later…

What happened is that, of over 200 gigantic alebrijes this year, right out of the Metro I find Victor and his *Agualixe Alebrijado*. By now we’re BFF, Victor and I, *carnales.*

He then surprises me with an official T-shirt for the parade. Not wanting to assume roles that I haven't earned, but feeling that indeed I *had* helped *some* at least, I *was* part of the team, so it's OK. I put it on. I'm now a Mexico *alebrijero*.

The next four hours are a blur of colors, shapes. Both sides of the route were solid walls of cellphone cameras. Many of them now have this gray-haired guy jumping with those jumping, dancing with the dancing troupes, sometimes helping pull an alebrije cart, mostly taking pictures and videos and talking with people.

Next time, we totally must bring here a Texas-size alebrije! I made friends, even helped direct alebrije traffic, distribute water bottles, hopefully *added* to the event, earned my T-shirt twice. I meet *Almorales* by providential circumstance, almost at the very end, bought a small alebrije and his own painting brush from him. Treasure.

Grinned like crazy, for hours. Another *time of my life,* to add to a growing collection.
Blessed.

In Pahuatlán by 9:30 PM, last bus in. Having befriended my next-seat neighbor, Luis Angel, he finds someone to point me to the quite acceptable and affordable Hotel Jardín. Highly recommended, like everything else in that friendliest town in Mexico. But that's another story.

Meet a *master cartonero*

In Bolivia, you address a self-employed handyman, the kind you hire to do some repairs or construction work, as *maestro*, that is to say, *master*. That informal title means that he can do things by himself, no need for an expert to supervise his work. Further South that won't do, as *maestro* means *elementary school teacher* over there, Argentinians are especially touchy about formal degrees and diplomas.

Guilds can make things even more complicated, and then there's even *that* Masonry, the one with capital M.

So, what makes me call Pedro a *master*?

My first degree was in Geography. I mention this to claim authority in affirming that what really sucks in map making is turning a curvy three-dimensional shape into a flat one, or vice versa. Not trivial.

Paper is flat. An *organic* form has complex curve surfaces. *Organic,* meaning mimicking life, even if imaginary. To make a lifelike *cartonería* figure, alebrije or not, you want to fit your *flat* paper to that complex *curve*. It won't happen without some loss, nor will it be perfect, except as an attempted approximation.

Using narrow strips of thin paper, like I do, makes this task appear simpler, but then adds up to much more work and time than using larger pieces of thicker, strong paper, like you can see in Pedro Linares' work.

Heavy, unbleached “raw” *kraft* paper, perhaps from cement bags, a traditional cheap source. His way ends up being more efficient, regarding both labor and materials.

However, large, rigid paper is hard to shape curvy, even when crushed beforehand, as he does. What to do, then?

The simplest procedure to shape flat rigid material into a curve, that any engineer knows, is to make a slit, overlap, attach. Clothing is one among many major examples of this. Construction, toys, boats...

The challenge is, where?

Then, how?

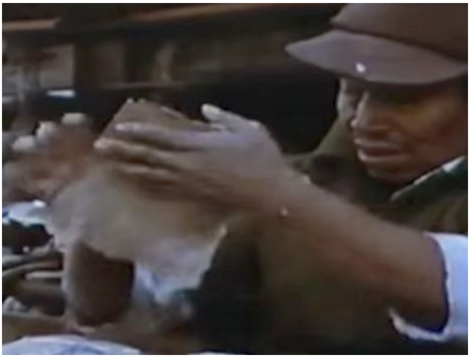
Will you use scissors, measure?
That takes time, and time is money, lost income…

In the following pages watch Pedro Linares do the slit, overlap, attach thing, besides much more, *just like that*, on the fly, seemingly without thinking, certainly without missing a beat, all the while chatting, explaining things.

Do watch that video that I told you about, when you get a chance!

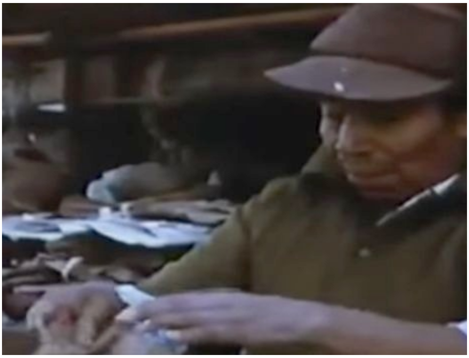
A master. (I’d say wizard h4x0r, if you grok that.)

The following images are presented courtesy of Judith Bronowski, captured from a VHS-to-YouTube version of the color Bronowski-Grant 1975 film Pedro Linares, artesano cartonero.



1:28 in the video.

Pedro daubs a piece of paper with glue, on one side



1:30

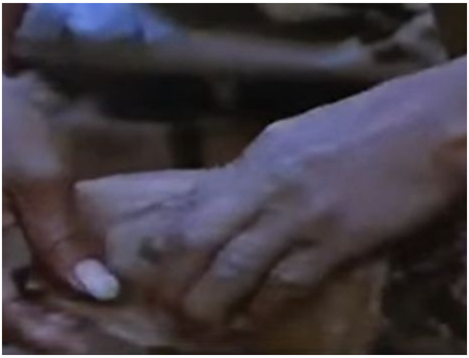
he places the paper on the form, patting it down

1:31

This paper is thick, strong. Faster to build with than thinner paper, but more rigid

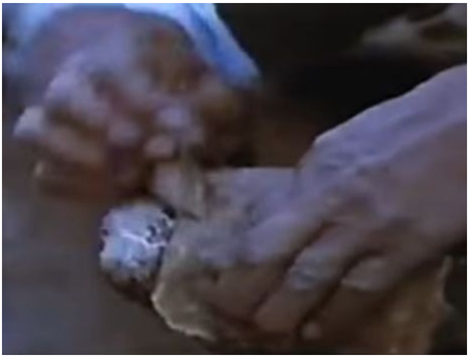
1:32

his hand notices it doesn’t quite fit the round shape



1:33

Right away, both hands go to the edge of the paper...



1:34

...rip a partial strip...

1:35

...he pats that down, making a strong overlap.

1:36

Then on to the next step in his work, another layer of paper.

Copal wood alebrijes

One of the most common objects sold today that is called an *alebrije* is a whimsically colored animal *carved out of wood*. An often quite beautiful specialty of Oaxaca, a valley 500 km southeast of Mexico City.

Some of the work that I have seen is high level craft, with evident artistry. A few copal wood carvers have even reached international success, something that is certainly not assured to all, despite hard work.

While carvers could use any kind of wood if buyers would accept it, apparently most tourists expect that an *original* wood alebrije from Oaxaca *should* be made of fragrant copal wood. Copal resin is still considered sacred by many, as it is said it was during Aztec times. This will spell doom for copal trees around alebrije-carving workshops, despite ongoing efforts at reforestation, and wood gathering limits.

Yet, who is to blame the carvers? I mean, each one *just wants one tree branch now,* will work that wood for weeks, using every bit and piece possible, sometimes in quite creative ways, pulling a creature out of the natural shape of a given branch or root. Is it *his individual fault* that copal trees become harder and harder to find?

Look at *kwalix.org* for more optimistic, ongoing efforts at helping Oaxaca carvers and other crafts.

The propitiatory figure

A standard interpretation of burning the *judas* is that it represents the destruction of sin or evil, a portrait of generic Greed or Lust or some such other getting its just comeuppance, or when its looks correspond to some current politician or criminal.

Not unique to Mexico: *remember, remember the 5th of November,* then go burn a *Guy*, commemorating that 1605 failed attempt by Guy Fawkes to blow up the English Parliament.

The Spanish Inquisition *auto de fe* is meant to clean through annihilation, it is *sanatory*, not *reparatory,* this latter being to pay back, restore, atone. Not just cut off.

Thus, I have my own, multicultural-biased atavistic guess, or *hypothesis* in fancy-speak.

Mayhap the *judas* is felt, at some *deeper* level, to be a *propitiatory* figure? A sacrificial event, when the burning figure not only *assumes* the crime but also does reparatory *penance*, by proxy, though its obliteration? More a Jesus, than a Judas?

Obvious parallels in the Mass, sacrificial lamb, etc. Either way, deep roots in archetypal Jewish-Christian tradition.

However, no resurrection here. Just ashes...

Practical issues, like, who’s payin’?

Something to consider, and it does matter a lot money-wise, is that there needs to be a sponsor for a *judas*. I mean, the cartonero makes the thing, then the thing gets burned during the fiesta… Nothing is left with any value. Good memories, and a royal hangover? So, how does the cartonero get paid for his work?

At the family level, a father might purchase from a street vendor a small *judas* to burn in the courtyard at home. This usually will be a typical devil-like figure: red, horns, painted fangs. Just a few pesos. If having to account for some misbehavior, from getting drunk too often, to adultery, the *judas* might get fancier, but not much. Either way, the ritual is to burn away the sins, in an attempt to forget our trespasses and have some fun.

That kind of *judas* is evidently a commodity object, utilitarian and expendable and ephemeral, say, like a basket, or a shopping bag. Not *art*, unless you’re too kind or too foolish, like I tend to be. I like much those plain products of craft...

A simple *judas* is not that hard to put together, doesn’t require much skill or vision or creativity. Thus, many, many people with weak incomes used to try their hands at making and selling them, in honest hopes of earning a few pesos.

Therefore, the market was swamped with plain *judas*. Obvious economics: such competition lowers prices to the barest profit for the makers, often exploited further by middlemen. All that forces the making, and the materials, and labor, to be the cheapest possible, in a vicious circle that hits bottom too often. This is baseline *cartonería*, nowadays mostly defunct.

Meanwhile, for a large community or neighborhood fair or festival, there are larger-than-life, more elaborate *judas*, taking several days to complete, and castillos, then also the opportunity to sell smaller pieces to the public, including toys, piñatas. Such community events tend to raise huge expectations, with infighting and bad blood paralleling those of a Cake Sale fundraiser hosted by any American Women’s Society.

For every *fiesta* worthy of the name, there will be a sponsor, a *padrino*, who will make it a point of prestige to spend as conspicuously as possible, no connection but identical to the spirit of a *potlatch*. It’s all about extravagantly showing off, overspending.

Getting in debt, even.

This is the place where you want to be, cartonero!

This kind of client will request extras and of course complain no matter what. Just make sure that you get paid in full before the party starts!

Those large events are the reason why being a *cartonero de oficio* made sense. That is why there was a solid guild of cartoneros in Mexico City, where to be admitted in you had to be well-connected besides showing the skills, and where dues were not trivial. Pedro was its president more than once.

This matter was not about the run-of-the-mill *judas* that anyone can make; rather, it was about the displays for large fireworks, those larger contracts where you get a chance to really make some profit when the *padrino* wants to show off, to *all* the padrinos of years past and hopefully all for years to come. Sometimes encouraging you to be innovative, certainly to go beyond whatever has been done before for this particular *fiesta*.

This one padrino this year might even *pay better* someone who can do spectacular, unique, *innovative* cartonería *reliably*.

That is where Pedro Linares and his family were positioned. Again, it wasn't terribly much what they were paid in these occasions, but it was better than the lot of many other craftsmen, even before the Linares were discovered as artists.

Several top-notch cartoneros in Thelmadatter's book complain that they have a hard time getting contracts worth the trouble of doing quality work nowadays.

As we said it perhaps too many times already regarding crafts, *cartonería* itself, as a day-to-day lifework, pays little.

But, twice a year, or more if you are quite lucky, the wealthiest merchant of your barrio, or some aspiring politician, or an incumbent using public funds, or a famous and well-off somebody, would come to your workshop in a fancy car, making your wife blush with pride when he calls you “don”, and, using that deep, nasal, raspy Godfather voice, Mr. Big will *ask you*, using the word *please*, to *please do an extra-good job* for him this year. Perhaps, even, you will be lucky enough that he will remember you after the event is past, and help you deal with that property title that you in fact deserve but can never get out of the amazing bureaucracy we have over there unless *someone* intervenes.

It is quaint to see *judas* in Venezuela today, portraying either a well-known orange-hair politician from another country, or else a local, pride of his nation, whose last name rhymes with *souro*.

Some craftsman gets a few extra devalued pesos, or perhaps even dollars especially if the contract comes from the government, to make a gruesome, lifelike *cartonería* portrait of their respective evil foe-of-the-day looking at its very worst and scary.

To burn...

Commodity vs. high art

18 years living here, I am still confused about Americans' approach to "art". Most seem to gather at the extremes of limited intellectual curiosity: either of *couldn't care less* or else *everything is art*.

Then, of course, there are nuances, and fashion is so incredibly essential to any pretend *aesthetic value* that they keep saying is what determines pricing.

Also, the impact of technology, as even expert artists cannot compete with photography when it comes to life-like accuracy, except as a stunt. Expectations seem to have moved in and out of the rustic since the days of the Arts & Crafts Movement, to stay now a bit north of *country rustic*, when it doesn't devolve outright into low-effort abstract for commercial art or for those who want to take a mantle of art connoisseurs.

Sometimes an outrageous appreciation of high-labor pieces becomes socially acceptable sadism, when using the words *painstaking work*. Is then the pain of the working poor something to celebrate and enjoy?

What gets called *art* could be more responsive here to some capricious *arbiter elegantiarum* than elsewhere, a state of things going on already a few generations, including for an example the graphic-industry recommended *colors of the season.*

Your art is something *worthy* if somebody who is somebody says so. Until that happens, to all intents and purposes, *it still is art* - but worth nothing much.

Sometimes we will speak of, and even appreciate and collect *folk art*, but usually from the folk of someone else. From places poorer than ours or more backward, or from the Old Country if we are into the ancestry quest.

Thereafter, folk art becomes pretty much a synonym for poor people art or craft, or almost worse, *indigenous ethnic art*, the more exotic and foreign the better, cheap being a good motivator to buy, too.

And we don't even blush at such evident patronizing, or of taking advantage of our privileged situation and income to purchase *painstaking* artifacts.

American folk art, something local and intrinsically linked to a specific community or region, often becomes nonsensical in this day and age when even the Amish label is attached to imports of dubious origin.

Either way, the whole concept of American folk craft is almost abandoned, there being less and less of both *folk* in the sense of distinctive community culture in this country as time goes by, and of the *making* of much that is beautiful and in fact also *useful* for something. Craft.

Back in Mexico, some 60 years ago, there came the time when someone paid some attention to alebrijes.

En Calavera lists several instances of a rising interest in Pedro’s work. This *patronage* tends to be additive. That is, at some moment a *critical mass* existed, of, well, appreciative *buyers*, perhaps encouraging each other while pointing at Pedro as an up-and-coming cheap investment, uh, I mean, *promising artis*t.

I happily hide behind my ignorance of the complexities behind this phenomenon, to dare remark that the Bronowski-Grant 1975 documentary, *Pedro Linares, artesano cartonero,* tagged Pedro as someone worthy of attention by the public, a special one set apart among many, of course because of the alebrijes, but meaningful to me also because his work is *representative* of *much more than his own*.

Going deeper, the meta- of what truly constitutes *art* gets silly very fast. *My kid could do that* is often painfully accurate. Somebody’s efforts hanging on some hallowed wall is often the result of luck, partying with the right kind of people, or worse. This is not just sour grapes of a not yet famous artist, it’s evident to anyone with eyes to see and art history to remember.

In the world of art, there is canonized *high art,* then there is l*ow art,* then somewhere *folk art,* and after that, you can have all the lexicographer fun that you want, *art naïf, outsider art*… Invent your own label, it would seem that everybody else does.

Bottom line, and it's the bottom line in dollars what counts, *High Art* practitioners get the big chalupa, the rest better find satisfaction in the act of creation, because such self-enjoyment might often be all that they will ever get.

The available specialist literature also mentions a fascinating analysis of this matter, portrayed in that insightful, pithy current-era recounting of philosophy and mores, Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*. One of my favorite strips of his finds our characters discussing whether *comics* are high art, or low. After well-reasoned considerations visiting Warhol and others, the punchline delivers that *a cartoon of a painting of a comic strip* is *merely sophomoric. Intellectually sterile. "Low" art.*

Cartonería, as in the run-of-the-mill standard, street-vendor *judas*, was not meant to be art. It was a consumable. Ephemeral, even more so than a concert poster, in fact the *judas* was meant to be destroyed, on purpose.

You may label it *folk art* at your peril, but price cares for rarity more than for any aesthetic value, so better if your rescued piece is old, different from what still shows up in museum gift shops. Best, when provenance is from a recognized artist. Such pieces could then sometimes even be accepted and valued as *high art*.

Like what happens to several by Pedro and his sons.

Alebrijes as art from craft

It happened in the land of Mexico somewhere in the 1980s that, in the dollar-sign eyes of certain collectors, Pedro Linares was anointed an *artist*. Meaning, those lucky enough to have purchased early pieces and could establish provenance found their collections rise in value, without much of an obligation to share the riches with the maker, who earlier had sold the items for a pittance.

Many rich collectors feel it’s a matter worthy of extra boasting to have paid poor people next to nothing… Poor collectors share the pain of the maker, will not be proud of paying so little, instead feel many emotions.

The government of Mexico would honor Pedro Linares in one category of the 1990 National Prize for Arts and Sciences, a year before his passing. Could have been worse. Could have been better.

Once alebrijes that were made by the Linares got appreciated, the family reached some comforts, a few international trips for exhibits and presentations, and even, wow!, a car.

One poignant, fascinating story, told in page 127 of *En Calavera*, describes a particular open-ended commission in 1989, paid for by the Childs family for the UCLA Fowler Museum.

According to Masuoka, this unusual, open creative freedom allowed Pedro to make an alebrije that was a more accurate portrayal of what he recalled from his dream, something he had tried before but couldn't sell to his usual clients. He said that nobody would buy those, they were *muy, muy feos* (very, very ugly).

Which got me intrigued. When I set myself to make alebrijes, I sort of wanted from the get-go to try a return to the source, which would be the way things were when Pedro started making his, *before* the Linares got famous.

I then came to realize that *alebrijes* are valued, maybe even understood as being iconic to Mexican culture, but *cartonería* itself, the actual craft, not so much.

Cartonería is today almost as ignored by specialists and the general public as it was before its partial conversion into art took place. Many sporadic cartoneros exist, as seen in the Desfile Monumental. Otherwise, ignorance or indifference toward this craft seem to be the norm.

I am happy for the Linares. I understand. I can recall how my Mom had a couple instances where every piece in an exhibit sold on opening day. I wish to think that it happens to the Linares also, hopefully again and again.

I do, however, feel my heart go also to the plain cartoneros, like the Linares were before, while I still share the happy with those artists who have made it.

I'm sure Pedro would understand.

Cartonería, papier-mâché?

Most people, bless their hearts, call *cartonería* a kind of papier-mâché, if cultured, or use the leaner paper-mache expression otherwise. Either wording has become an accepted norm. For one who really *knows*, either is blatantly inaccurate as catch-all labels for everything involving some form of paper plus glue.

By definition, *cartonería*, and the material, *cartón piedra*, are made from pieces or strips of paper. *Not* from ground, pulp-like mashed paper, *chewed* paper, which is what *mâché* means.

Papier-mâché is almost like a putty or clay, offered or sold or taught as an alternative to ceramics, because it can be shaped free hand or extruded or molded.

Quite, quite different, *cartón piedra* is formed by layers of paper strips coated with glue, on an armature. Once dry, it becomes a very light and strong composite material, much stronger than most of the best actual papier-mâché, highly suitable for sculpture and three-dimensional work. The Mexico Museum of Popular Arts calls it *agglomerate paper*. Alas, the otherwise quite accurate word *cartonnage* is only seen in Egyptian archaeology.

If you are going to use a foreign word anyway, can't you please learn, and use, *the right one*? And I mean you, arts schoolteacher, arts or crafts book author.

Other paper sculpture media

Both cartonería and papier-mâché rely on cellulose fibers, the former when already matted together as sheets of paper, the latter as loose clumps of fiber. Plus glue. Other variants are possible.

Cellulose fibers, like cotton spun and wove into a loose fabric, and plaster and water, voilà, you made a cast for a broken bone. At the other industrial extreme is raw ground wood pulp, wood shavings, even sawmill waste, with any among many glues, including fancy marine epoxy. Press a lot, sell that as manufactured particle board, perhaps causing allergic reactions among those living in new construction if you happened to use the cheap urea-formaldehyde glue as the binder.

Italian *cartapesta* uses paper very heavily sized with gelatin, sometimes in layers, or shaped using heat, or else a dense mix of paper pulp with gelatin, cast in plaster molds. The French and especially Germans specialized in doll parts made from a similar cast and pressed paper pulp and glue mix, something known to collectors as *carton moulé*, *carton pâte*, or *holz-maße*, this latter expression used by the USA collectors but apparently not so much in Germany.

Interestingly, someone recently patented gluing together layers of plain fabric, an ancient Egyptian method.

Lupitas of Celaya

With endemic corruption, abundant natural resources and tariff-laden economies, Latin American countries didn't go much for technology and industry.

Between one thing and another, artisanal, locally made cartonería dolls, often called *monas*, were for many years the only affordable option until modern plastic took over. Stores selling supplies for crafts or sewing used to offer doll faces. German, Czech or, for top pesos, French. The pricier monas often would have these to good effect.

Cartonería dolls are usually best shaped in molds, this being the main tool required by a *juguetero,* a *toymaker*. The Pedro Linares documentary shows how he forms a cartón piedra shell on top of a leg of a plastic doll, using that as an inside-out mold. This technique is used by cartonero generalists, those making dolls as a derivative, not quite yet specialist *jugueteros*.

Celaya, state of Guanajuato, Mexico, had quite a tradition of cartonería monas, called *Lupitas*, diminutive for Guadalupe. The April 2019 passing of Carlos Derramadero, much missed master cartonero, might not be the ultimate end of this craft specialty there, as Celaya and nearby Salamanca have active cartoneros. Besides of course the *Miss Lupita Project* in Mexico City.

Castilleros and jugueteros

Speaking of words, specialization in crafts deserved its own job titles. While the best cartoneros can do good work for many and any occasion, it might happen that some become especially known for some specific products, sometimes creating locally a bit of an exclusive market, even regional renown for their specialty.

A *castillero* makes the large assemblies of *cartón piedra* figures and pyrotechnics known as *castillos*. Skills in the arts of fire bending must be outstanding, both for continued employment and survival.

The *juguetero* is nearly extinct by now, this being a craftsman that made *cartón piedra* toys before the time when plastics took over. Horses and dolls were the main product lines, but also helmets, swords, shields.

These latter were needed for costumes of Roman soldiers in Easter Passion plays, but any warm-blooded kid will dress up that way just for fun.

I purposely said *kid*, and not just *boy*, because both my sister and I found much enjoyment with shields and swords made from discarded Hollerith cards that Dad would bring home from work. Even got a school costume parade prize for a full suit of armor made that way.

Of course, I also made for her some rather fancy doll houses, oh yes, with an elevator and all, as it should be.

Classic cartonería

Let’s put a few things together, my young padawan.

First, I am not a *cartonero de oficio*. Neither am I a Jedi, so quit calling yourself *padawan*, so embarrassing!

Second, the word “classic” has many meanings, and I go for *what is seen as a model worthy of widespread imitation*. Meaning, “the way” of doing things for a long period of time before any moderner alterations messed it up. *Contemporary classical music* I find often to be a contradiction in terms, few ever will imitate or play *that*, while the true *classic* masters of old, and you know what I mean, show up all the time in *KMFA by Request*.

Third, I have been gaining more respect and tolerance for cultural syncretism, how things change, adapt to new circumstances, merge with each other, therefore eroding their *classic*, but still being OK.

Hmm, that was confusing. Let’s put it this way: when I do *cartonería*, I want to do it like it was done before some of it became famous and therefore changed its ways to become even famouser.

Meanwhile, I also do value the ways that some of it has changed. Often, people will pay better money for the “new & improved”, *capisce*? That would be the *syncretic* forms, or *fusion*, as a millennial would say.

To top up, I'll add my own innovations. As to *First* earlier, what I said means *your mileage may vary.* My expertise is merely circumstantial, eat your veggies, brush your teeth. A cartonero, yes, but no expert, not *de oficio*.

The history of *cartonería* properly fades in from some lost point of origin, before getting noticed and registered in records and memorials. It was a true *people's* activity, irrelevant to the learned and powerful for quite a while, if for no better reason because it was hard to tax.

Not an art, not a science, barely a *manufacture*, local and low-key. Just something that the little people did for fun with leftover, discarded paper? Maybe appeared in several places as a penecontemporaneous independent invention, meaning *almost at the same time*, don't you also like the big huge words?

Cartonería certainly is found in many places, despite Wikipedia. Must fix. It shows up as *cartapesta* in Italy, especially in Puglia and environs, in Carnival events in Spain and elsewhere, also the *Tarasca* in Tarascon.

In some form and with the wrong moniker, many have made a so-called paper-mache mask in school, covering a balloon with strips of paper and glue. *Cartonería.*

It is at the original meaning of *cardboard,* as used for hundreds of years to manufacture playing cards, and in many other industrial and artisanal uses.

Book-board, cardboard

Into my world, for a moment, let me pull you.

For over 18 centuries, every single sheet of paper, everywhere, was made by hand.

Making Good Paper that way is not trivial, but simple enough that where it finds a market it can be done even today, often quite well, despite the labor cost of *handmade* making it hard to compete with machines.

Good paper, and we wouldn't want any other kind, is even in thickness. It so happens that to make even, uniform paper by hand is easier in what we call *copy paper* up to *cover paper* thickness, thereabout 60 to 150 gsm.

Try to form thicker sheets than that in one single go, the papermaking pulp tends to settle unevenly on your mould. Drains slowly. Wasting time. Not good.

For generations, people made thicker *pasteboard* for boxes by *gluing* together multiple layers of lower quality paper, or misprints, even handwritten, used paper.

Book-board for bookbinding? Likewise, just more layers, then press. Playing cards came from *card*-board (get it? "card"), same process, but using better paper. Handmade paper, glued in layers, by hand. Hard work, fun today, but harsh back then, competition was fierce.

Layers of paper and glue? That's *cartonería*!

The movie *Coco*

I was almost done with this book when I noticed that I had not mentioned Disney’s movie *Coco* to much extent, and what they call *alebrijes* there. Almost deciding to leave it so, because ignoring things is sometimes a more elegant form of dissing, I then figured it would be better to be more straightforward.

Some creatures in appearance similar to modern alebrijes are a most important element in this film, rather thick with stereotypes of Mexico culture.

1) a nice, entertaining movie. Brilliant, even. *Classic*. Can’t praise much higher than that. The animation is superb. The creatures pretty to a fault.

2) not to be taken seriously as an accurate expression of Mexican culture, and much less regarding how spiritual reality *works* there or anywhere.

I wish I could point you to a better alternative to share about Mexican culture in Elementary School, I really don’t know. Do you have any advice?

I applaud teachers, and every one that is trying to build a better understanding between cultures. Integration, tolerance – not segregation. *Coco* being widely acclaimed for its purported *cultural* value, it is better to show that movie, with a storyline that brings us together, than something else that enshrines division and strife.

Thinking origins far out of the box

For *cartonería* to flourish you need abundant, cheap paper. Something impossible in colonial Mexico before the late 1700s, as the Spaniards, in their efforts to tax everything and especially control thought, required all paper to be brought from Spain, red-taping to death any local production. Paper wasn't much cheaper elsewhere in the world at that time anyway, until industrial machine production got in, lowering prices.

However, Mexico *did* have a long history of making paper! Using amate bark, a good thousand years before Fabriano radically improved on Arabic papermaking by 1300 AD. Are there archaeological artifacts of glued-together layers of amate? I like to think that somehow, perhaps, through atavistic connections, it is not a mere accident that *cartonería* developed best in Mexico...

Unrelated, some late Egyptian funerary masks were made of *cartonnage*: discarded papyrus, resin, and plaster. Papyrus sheets glued together were book boards for hundreds of years in the Greek-Coptic world, since 300 AD. Then of course the legendary *Chinese paper armor.* As late as 1886 Hui warriors wore armor described as made of *30 to 60 sheets of paper attached together*. MythBusters tested the concept, declared it *plausible.*

Cartonería is such an obvious invention, it's no surprise to see it everywhere!

Alebrije, or *cartonería*?

The next section is called *Make Alebrijes*. However, all over I say *cartonería* this, *cartonería* that.

Let me put it this way. I am for freedom of religion and personal choices that do not hurt others. It so happens that *my* particular preference in these matters is toward *crafts*. I have no fight with those who would rather care for *art* in the post-post-modern sense of that word.

Art sells, some. Crafts barely do, even then seldom leave much profit. Thus, when trying to sell, and I better or else, my focus often is in presenting the *artsy* side of my handmade paper and prints. Then, as I educate my audience, I can dare bring them to the light.

Better able to perceive deeper truths now, they can understand that *craft* is the heart of the *making* process of art, while what others call *art* is merely noticeable in the final surface, a skin as it were. Which is important, too, no doubt, essential even. But not the *core*.

Therefore, until you are dealing with painting the final colors of your piece, you are *mine*. You are dealing with one of *my* crafts, *cartonería*.

After you are done with the core, please do enjoy finishing your artistic alebrije to your heart content, in full creative freedom, having already gained at no additional cost a rather unique full knowledge of what is *inside*.

Updates, corrections, links, extra pictures, videos and additions to this book can be found in the website *papeltexano.org/alebrijes*

Make Alebrijes

The basics

OK boys and girls, gather together, let’s make some *cartonería*!

- For the armature, you will need *wire* or *split cane reed*, and *string*. Pliers, cutting tools.
- Legs, arms, horns, fangs depend on some shape built on the armature with gobs of paper, or else pieces of *cardboard*, sometimes tied with string, or held in position with toothpicks.
- The body will need some sort of *stuffing*, or a pillow that is removed after the hard shell has dried. Typically, in schools a *balloon* is used instead, to support the layers of paper. Personally, I find that a balloon shape limits the creative flexibility that I prefer to have. Your choice.
- Now comes the *cartón piedra* proper. *Strips and pieces of paper*, plenty of *engrudo*. Mind that it will take several days to make a good shell, as each layer must fully dry.

To avoid the so-called *papier-mâché disgrace*, where the surface ends up all lumpy and irregular, so familiar in beginner’s work, you may want to go for a smooth finish surface, perhaps even shiny.

Either of actual plaster of Paris, or gesso, or drywall compound will help you achiev that. Then sanding, after completely dry.

Get some rough and fine sandpaper, perhaps a rasp if you go this way. The smoothest and sleekest results need several cycles of plaster, followed by sanding, drying in between.

When sanding, ABSOLUTELY please use a breathing filter or adequate respirator, and good ventilation, and mind where that dust is going, as your spouse or neighbors might not be secretly coveting to have a fashionable dusty white finish for their car. Definitely don’t try sanding indoors. Trust me, I should know.

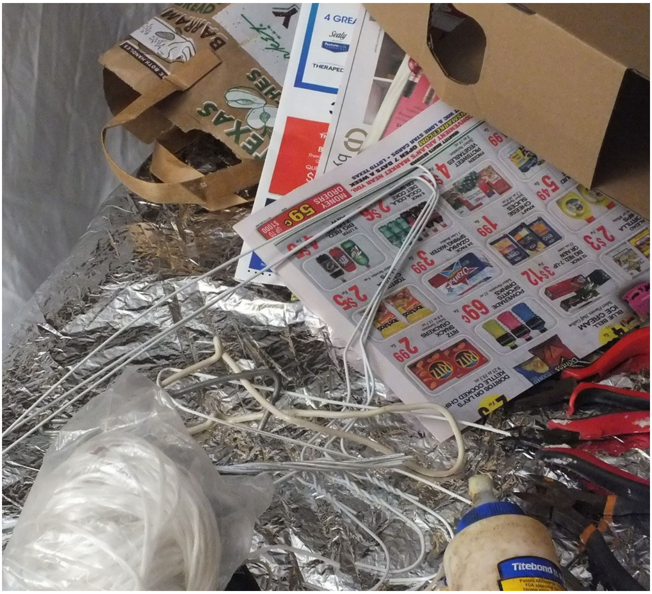
If you are almost a wizard, you might be able to get a smooth finish just with paper. A fancier effect is to leave the final layer of newspaper visible, as text or images.

An opaque white base paint is tradition and a good idea, as it brings out the colors. In true classical *cartonería*, this white base is painted directly onto the rough surface of the paper, rarely a plaster or gesso layer is applied.

On top of the white, let’s have some color. While I do like to paint, actual graphic design is something that I find difficult, as there are just too many alternatives and I have a hard time deciding which one I should go for. For pigments, I do favor natural earth ochers, see that section, but I also enjoy oils and acrylics.

For a finish, the main choice is to varnish, or not to, more *classic*. When I do varnish, mine is the thick, deep clear coat, multiple layers, each drying well in between.

Tools & Materials



Clockwise from top left: paper bags, newspaper, pliers, wire (coat hangers), string. Not shown but most important, *engrudo* paste.

With the above, you're in business as a cartonero.

Everything else can be a *nice to have*, perhaps necessary but not essential.

What paper to use?

Cartoneros were, and most of them still are, quite poor. It is obvious they would use discarded paper, right? Pedro Linares purchased his from *ropavejeros*, scavengers going door to door with their hand cart, buying and selling recyclables, way before this latter word became hip.

Used newspaper? Wrapping, packaging, kraft sack paper? Cement bags? It so happens that those are indeed the right choices, better for *cartonería* work than something else such as store-bought, new office printer paper.

This is because fancier paper has *sizing* to make it somewhat waterproof, to avoid ink soaking through from digital printers, ink pens or markers.

Meanwhile, humble, discarded, so much the better if crumpled paper will *soak* in better the engrudo glue paste, resulting in stronger *cartón piedra*. Paying extra for your *cartonería* paper, not worth it.

See in the pictures how I began with advertising fliers, newsprint, but quickly ran out because we aggressively recycle. Then I ended up using the cheapest, institutional rough, brown paper towels that come in rolls.

Flexible enough, and suitably absorbent, this paper gave me also as a bonus the right classic brown color finish of used cement bags. Just avoid any paper that won’t take water easily, and you should do fine.

Wire, string

In the spirit of things, I prefer the rescued and reused that comes from something else and finds its new life in an alebrije. Old, malleable aluminum wire from old wiring, or thick leftover copper wire from more modern electricity installations are quite easy to work with, pleasant.

I used dry-cleaning coat hangers, which, to my surprise, it appears we are not supposed to send those for recycling?

Anyway, coat hanger wire I have found so useful through the years for many projects that I always keep a few of those around. I also used some leftover plain, rusty tying steel wire I had on hand.

String will be called for when building the shapes attached to the skeleton, or for bundling paper as muscles and body. Again, leftover feels right if you have it.

Now, perhaps this is getting overboard, and I am merely trying to justify a lifetime of hoarding junk as if it were some sort of better-than-thou, environmental tree-hugging display of what a nice guy I am.

Please, seek balance, find the peace hiding between the old and the new. And I *am* a nice guy, while now I keep one (only one!) box of materials for *cartonería*, with the very best choice leftovers.

Hand tools, molds

If using wire, you will need some pliers to work it, though wire would have been a luxury for real cartoneros back when. Split cane reeds tied with string is the more classic canon *cartonería* structure, much better for larger figures than many fancier alternatives. A knife or a machete, to work the reeds.

Some pots to make engrudo, to prepare and handle paint, a couple fine brushes for detailed work, perhaps homemade from cat hair as shown in the video. That’s about it. Sandpaper for sanding. That plaster dust is no good for you, please use a respirator. Please.

In fact, the only resource with any degree of complexity that a cartonero *needs* is engrudo.

There is also a bit of an *I-have-arrived* moment when, as a cartonero, you make and then use your own molds.

Don Pedro Linares did, had quite a bit of mold-making savvy. He tells that he learned this skill as a kid, when apprenticed to a potter, and when he did a stint as a construction *peon*. His mold for a Seal of the Republic of Mexico shows up in several photos in *En Calavera*. He felt proud of helping one of his sisters set up shop as a cartonera, giving her molds. Those were valuable tools, otherwise rather quite difficult to procure. He himself often shaped *cartón piedra* around plastic doll parts.

Engrudo, paste

Engrudo + paper = *cartón piedra*!

As you practice, you will find that a certain paste consistency is just right for the way *you* work. Because you want your engrudo to soak your paper good, you may prefer it thinner, waterier than usual bookbinding paste, but not so flowy that it drips and makes a mess.

Book-Arts-L, in its 25th year, is an old-fashioned email list dedicated to book arts, that I have the honor to be a participant of. Not long ago there was this spirited discussion regarding *paste*, as in wheat or wallpaper or library paste, an adhesive made from cooked flour.

Book-Arts-L participants are generous with their knowledge. Yet, it seems that paste, and paste-making can get people passionate... Someone’s recipe they learned from their master must *obviously* be the right one and superior to all others. Then, because there are different kinds of wheat flour, plus substantive differences between flour and starch, it so happens that there are indeed several, different *good* recipes. Much fun was had, but not much consensus.

I’ve known, made, and used engrudo since quite young, but I am finding that it’s the fact that I am older and more patient what gets it right nowadays. Adding some carpentry glue is considered cheating, but it does work.

Fancy paste, and gluten free

More than you need to know: there is much fun in the chemistry of dextrine, which requires roasting the flour dry, before mixing it with water. Think roux, or sauce béchamel. The trick with roux is slow, slow heat, or else fast and intense mixing, this latter I learned by being mentored by Marty, my restaurant chef neighbor.

For standard boiled engrudo, plain starch gelatinization takes time. That is why two-day old mix is better than fresh. I assume that pregelatinized spray-dried wheat starch is what is sold as powder wallpaper paste, which also benefits from sitting a while after mixing with water, then being stirred often.

Boiled tapioca flour sticks terrible to anything. This appears to be the gluten-free alternative for making adhesive paste, important to those allergic to gluten, because you might get paste all over your skin as you work *cartonería*.

I have been exploring this tapioca-based paste with rather satisfactory success so far, after failing somewhat when trying rice-based pastes. With tapioca, the result is a dense slime, not a more flowing liquid easier to work with a brush, yet with excellent initial adhesive tack, forming what appears to be permanent bonds of strong *cartón piedra,* but somewhat sensitive to humidity.

Engrudo recipe

- *1 cup boiling water in a pot*
- *½ cup cold water*
- *3 tablespoons flour (wheat or tapioca)*
- *a preservative (optional)*

Get water to a happy boil while you mix well the flour and cold water with a beater if available. Pour this cold mix in the boiling water. Stir while it boils again, beware of burning the pot. Simmer 10 minutes. Especially if using wheat, let sit a day or two for best results. Stir. That's it.

Made too much? Add some sugar, cinnamon, and you have a custard dessert!

A few drops of clove oil, maybe ground cloves, or 1/4 teaspoon of sodium benzoate (0.7g) might help delay rot. Benzoate is that E211 in food labels, generally considered safe, but many people don't agree. If store-bought paste lasts more than a week without molds, probably some *biocide* was added already, *biocide* means *life-killer*.

Want it organic? Make your own like I do, without preservatives, and use within a few days. I am losing my aversion to add some carpentry glue, to get the resulting *cartón piedra* to stay hard even during humid days.

How to *forrar*

Forrar, according to Ricardo Linares, is the word used to describe the process of daubing engrudo onto paper and then layering this onto a shape.

Much of your productivity depends on this skill, not one that can be taught as much as something that is acquired and built through continuous practice.

After 2-3 layers of paper, you may want your figure to dry out before adding more, to avoid it losing shape. Ricardo says that if you *really* know how to *forrar*, you don't need to wait ▯.

Finishing a single figure may be a several-day project, just a few minutes each work session. Obviously, a true full-time cartonero works a bit on each of dozens of figures during a given day.

An issue that could get experts fighting: some mostly daub engrudo on one side of the paper rather than on both, because faster, though doing it on both makes the next layer attach easier... Choices, choices.

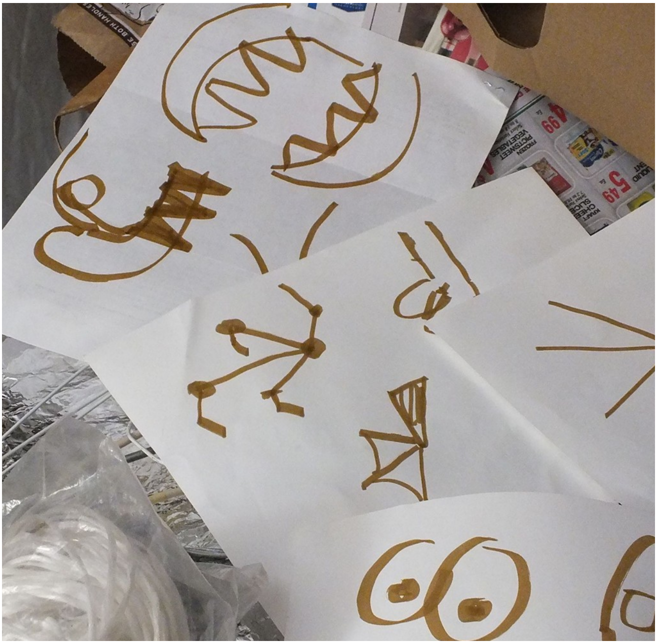
Therefore, find your own happy point. And an apron. Yes. *Forrar* can get messy. As a former Rugby coach with a national championship trophy, I believe in full-contact everything. When I am doing *cartonería*…

Well, let's just say, it's best that I keep my hair cut short.

Design stage

Sometimes I operate *a pelo*, riding a horse without a saddle, and then wish I had taken the time to plan things better. Other times I get stuck with a perfect plan that just won’t fly as it encounters reality.

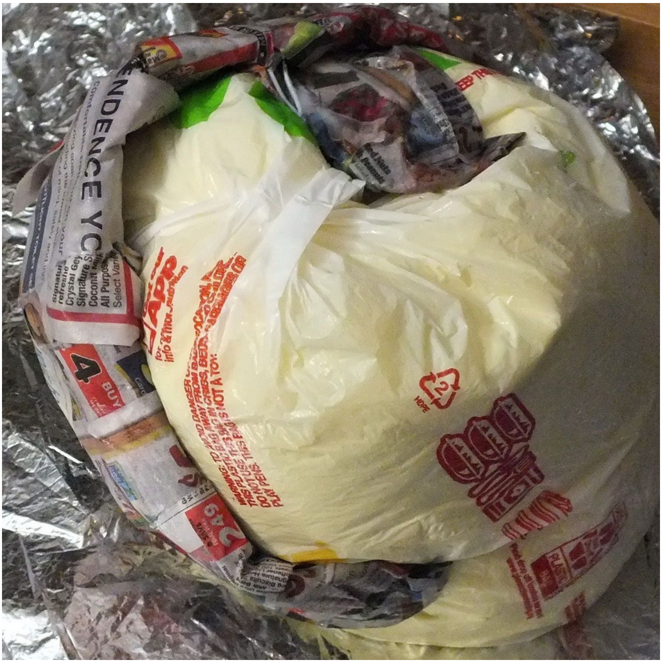
Here, a few draft ideas of what I intended. Some were actually used. Yay.



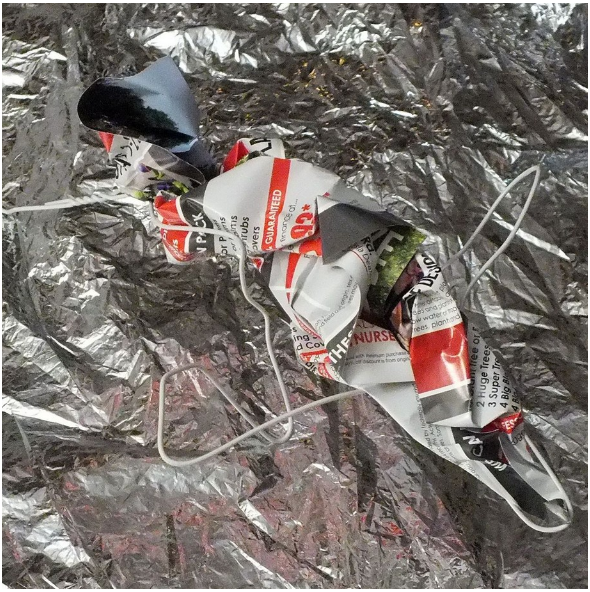
Body building

It is a bit of a standard in classrooms to use a balloon as the basic form to shape a shell on. I find the forced spherical shape hinders my creativity.

I rather prefer to put a soft beanbag pillow inside a plastic bag, then build the shell, later removing the pillow and bag when the *cartón piedra* is dry.



The main armature



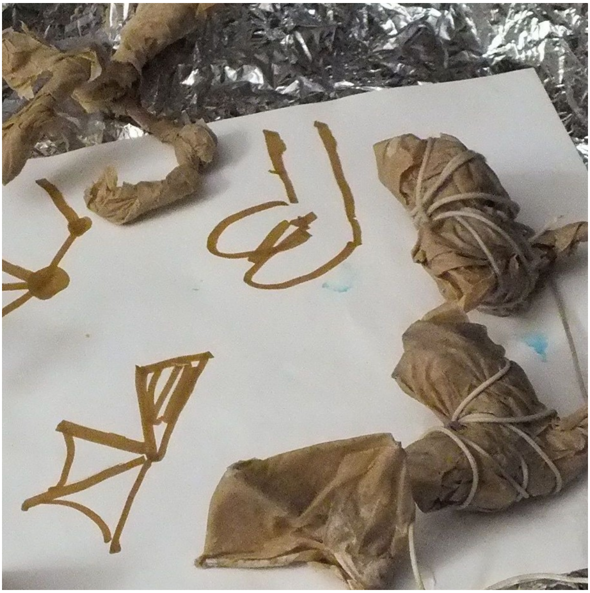
All the figures I built began as a bent coat hanger free-form armature. The shape shown here roughly provides for a snout on one end and a tail in the other, with wings or ears or something to be determined jutting off the sides.

At this stage it is not quite clear what the creature will look like when finished. That gets resolved during an open conversation between the maker and the creation.

Then I formed the body shell, adding strips of crumpled newspaper with engrudo, improving a rough shape that soon started to become. Creatures would peacefully take turns to be worked on, then go dry outside.

After a while, all doorknobs were duly and thoroughly *enatoladas*, as it should be *chez* a cartonero. This word, “enatolar”, I came across only once, in a *cartonería* blog, *atole* being a traditional beverage made with boiled corn flour, not unlike engrudo.

String and crumpled paper



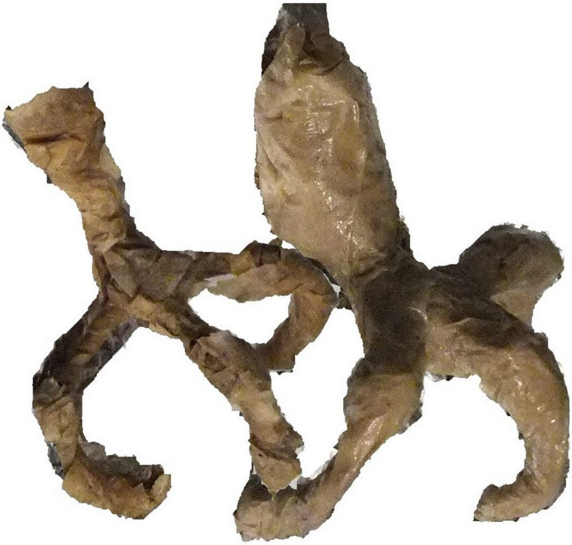
One skilled in the art can build really accurate bone and muscle shapes with crumpled paper and string on an armature structure. Not I, yet. I somehow got the bulky hooves (above right) and the thinner claws (above top left and next page) to be distinct and specific.

Notice the string used to tighten up a shape, to be removed when it is dry enough.

Building muscle

Two stages in building the legs and claws.
At left is the earlier step, just a general shape, not much padding yet.

Then, after that first layer had a chance to dry some, material was added during a second pass to further define well the knuckles and meatier upper legs, as seen at right.



Drying

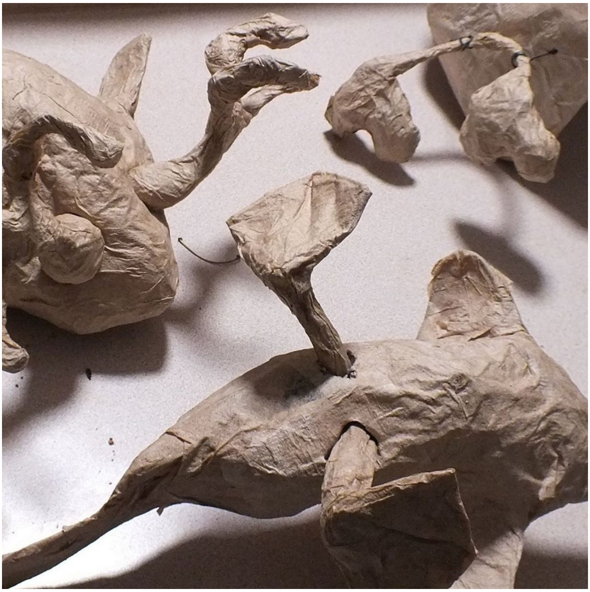
The parts I made during the first day got a chance to dry completely overnight. This is important, as the shell skin is soft while wet and will not keep a shape well until it gets to dry completely.

Currently, the feet were unassigned. Who would get what? Each found its place later.

Feet on!

Bato was meant to be generally horizontal, with stubby wings. This changed once the legs were assigned and placed, as the creatures gained their own stance and gait, and their personality started coming together.

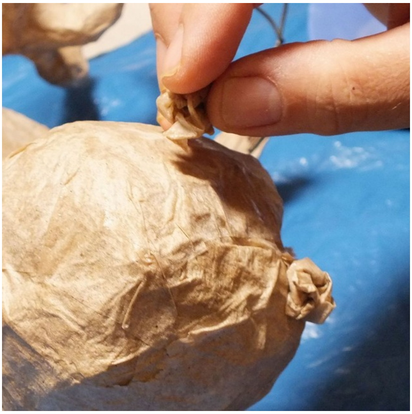
Note: to be sturdy, the attachment points for the legs needed a lot of reinforcement.



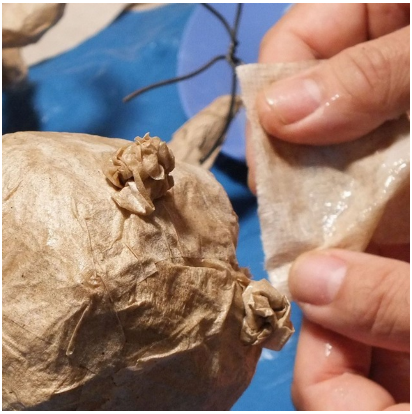
Eyes

This technique will do for most protuberances.

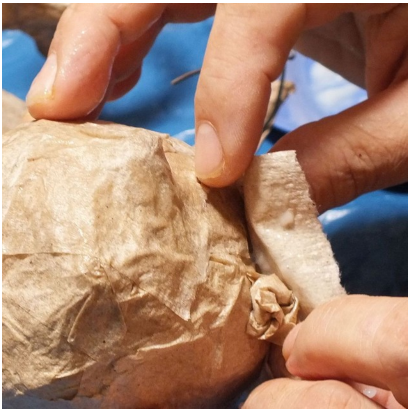
A small wad of paper glued in position.



Then a layer of paper to cover the extra material. Maybe use softer, more flexible paper for this?



Cover with paper and set in place…

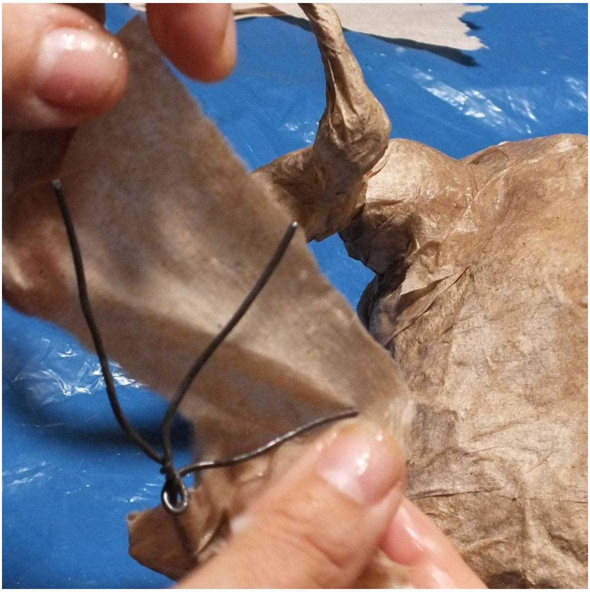


… then, press in to form the final shape, and smooth the surface.

Armature for details

Just like the legs, some details required their own wire armature, for example the duck feet and the bat wings.

Originally the latter were going to Pura, but Bato, now standing up, looked silly with stubby wings, so asked to have the bat wings for himself.



Wrapping tight

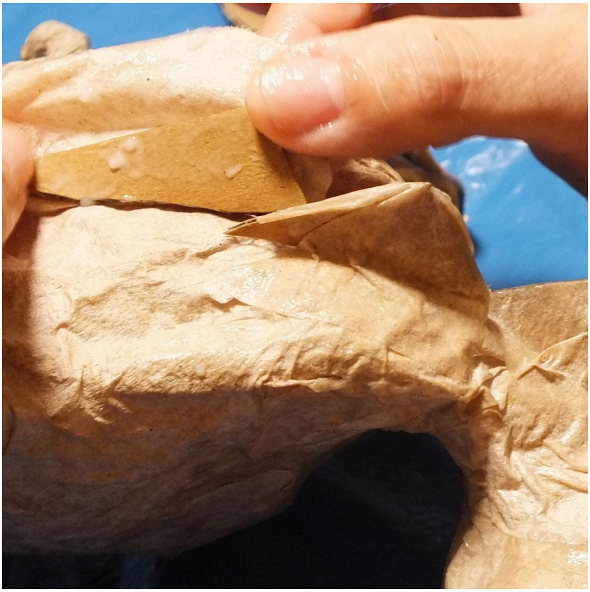
The bat wings are quite thin, just two layers of paper, one per side of the wire armature.

Eventually I thickened the outside “bone”, but didn’t much care this time for accurate anatomy, although I bent the wires further, so the wing membranes would appear concave.

Cardboard details

For some extra details, rigid cardboard, like from a cereal box or from shipping, will do peaches.

Cardboard cannot be glued directly to the body with success but will stay put when covered with paper with engrudo, better if anchored first to the main shell with a toothpick.

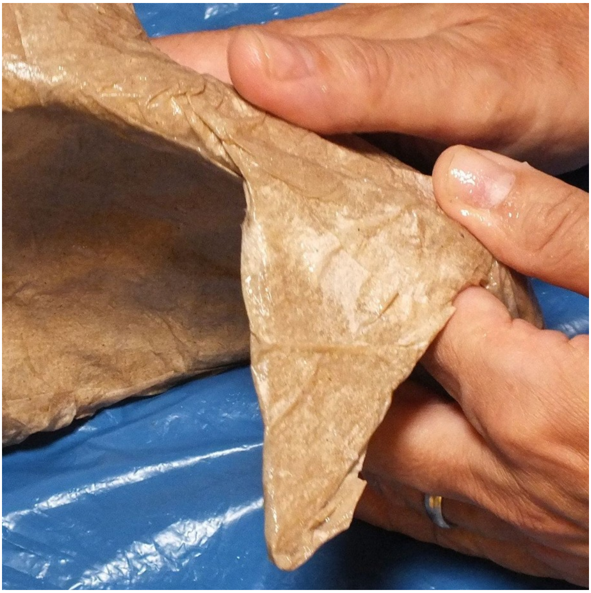


Using a piece of stiff cardboard gives a firm base to then play with more flexible wet paper for details.

With paper and cardboard on an armature, any shape can be achieved fast and cheaply. Lighter and stronger, too, than many other sculpture mediums.

Best design production probably would have each of these additions have some sort of good anchor. It can be as simple as a toothpick going through the cardboard piece and then driven into the already dry, hard *cartón piedra* shell.

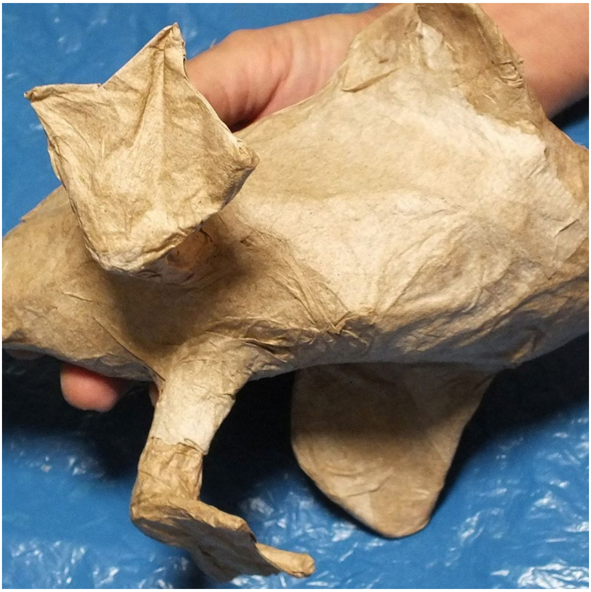
I didn’t use anchors, but you can. Probably should, for more precise positioning of the parts.



A detail view of a tooth after two coats of paper. The first layer is to position and hold it in place, then, after drying, a second coat smooths the shape, closer to its final stage. Excess can be trimmed away.

Except for a white base and color paint, this would be the final state for strict classical *cartonería*. Otherwise and for a fancier look, go for a final smooth plaster coat.

Plain paper finish



When the final layer of paper has dried, the formal *forrado* work is done. A coat of white paint, as a base for colors, starts the painting and decorating phase.

In the good old days, white paint was poisonous lead oxide, *blanco de España*. I make my own with engrudo and the much safer titanium dioxide.

Fine plaster finish

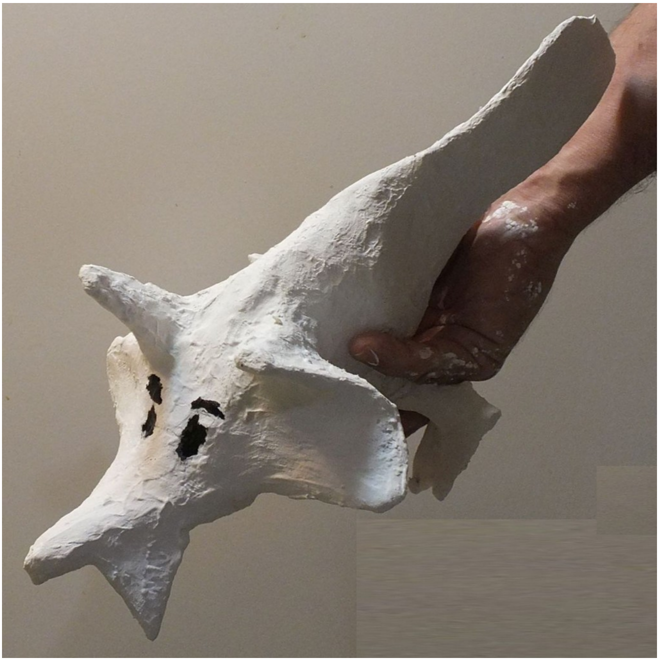
When *cartonería* was a cheap, burn-away product, its makers seldom had enough of a profit margin to afford to do much of a finish.

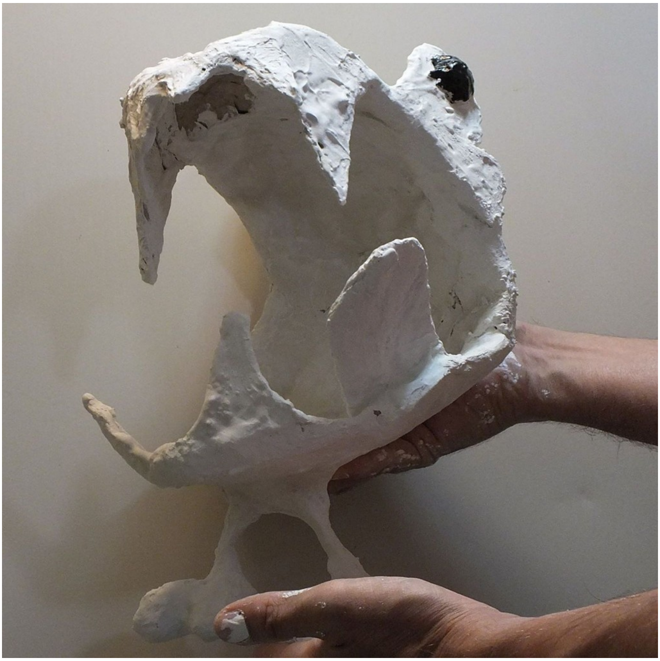
Exceptions were the rarer and fancier heirloom pieces, such as church Nativity scenes. See also, for example, the *cartapesta* fine paper sculpture tradition from the Puglia region in Italy.

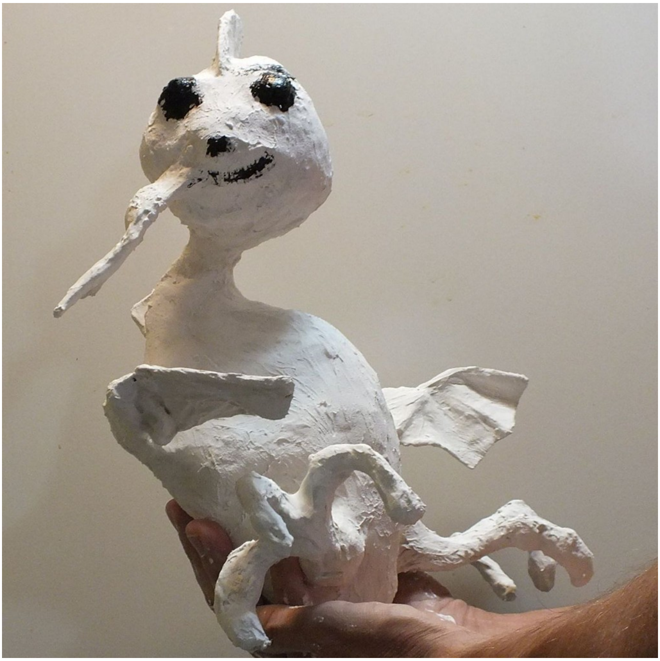
Rough plaster coat

A first layer of plaster fills in the gaps in the paper skin but needs further effort to achieve the desired smooth finish.

In the picture below the plaster is being worked in by hand. It was still rough after it set and left to dry overnight, as the following pictures show. Later it was evened with a rasp, then fine sanded.







Surface finishing, sanding

I was not happily surprised by the amount of work that it took to sand down the surface to achieve a smooth, sleek effect.

It was a ghastly job, in some of the record heat of Austin’s summer of ‘19.

Trying to work inside, I promptly covered most of the kitchen with a thin layer of plaster, despite my precautions and a most ingenious and creative dust collection system with a fan and a large cloth bag.

Wife did notice some peculiar extra dust, but wisely made no comments at the time, I probably looked exhausted. She will learn about its cause for the first time now, reading this. Hi honey!

You may want to use a Dremel or some other power tool, as I did at times. Knock yourself out, but outside!

I found a carpenter file or rasp to be the most effective tool to do the rough work, rather than a Dremel. And working early in the morning. Outside. With a fan blowing the dust away. Did I say outside? And a respirator.

And leaving funny fingerprints on door edges everywhere, that lasted months.

I should go clean those...

Colorful finish

I make my own white base coat paint with titanium dioxide, the best white pigment ever, dense opaque besides generally considered safe, in an engrudo base. Likewise, my own iron oxide ochers color Pura, then acrylics and oil paint markers for all three.
Apparently, Pedro Linares, like many of his generation, used toxic lead-based paints, for years. He also knew how to prep his own pigments into paint.
Time to color. I had fun, but it was lot of work. Not much to say about it, just paint, and paint, and paint some more.
Finally, varnish. Some of the earliest Alebrijes of Don Pedro show to my eyes the use of linseed oil as a finish. Am I reading too much into this, or is it that the very presence of some type of varnish immediately sets those figures as something *different* from the usual *cartonería judas* sold on streets?

It works this way: a traditional, hand-to-mouth cartonero will varnish but seldom. Neither the money for it, nor the time to do that additional step and then wait for it to dry, etc. The other side of the coin says that a glass-like finish like the clear-coat of car bodies just looks *better* and perhaps can be sold for more. Capisce? Go make friends with a body shop, see if they will clear-coat your alebrijes!

Updates, corrections, links, extra pictures, videos and additions to this book can be found in the website *papeltexano.org/alebrijes*

Artist Statements and such

How I found out that I was already a cartonero

So, I was in a bit of self-inflicted hurry to complete the *Alebrijes of Austin!* art pieces, in late July 2019, way before much of this book came together.

It had been a long road to get there. Let's say that it started officially more than a year before, when I applied for a City of Austin cultural arts grant, May 1st, 2018, after several weeks of prior preparation.

My goal for the *Paper Connections* project is to help build bridges of understanding and awareness between the many cultures represented in Austin. I feel success when sharing, for example, some Chinese calligraphy with a diverse public in a primarily African American University, as we did recently. Reinventing *cartonería* in Austin? Similar intention, connecting old there, with new here, sharing.

This attitude requires to be careful about not appearing to invade or hurt the sentiments of those who feel that they *own* a given cultural medium, format, artifact, or community, and are not too welcoming of those they see as *aliens*, *strangers*. Not always easy to connect!

Also, for quite evident reasons, a path to integration and diversity starts *exactly* by being oneself an enthusiast of a diverse worldview, open to learn from others, to share.

I enjoy exploring cultural traditions, study and listen, knowing well that I will always remain short of mastery, not *belong*. My goal is often to just get to a point where I can *share my experience*, not to become an expert.

By nature, and nurture, I’m a maker.

Generally, I just get *making*, maybe take a cursory look at a Wikipedia article right before, or not even that much, like when I began making classic western paper by hand back in ‘16. Later on, I will get into deep serious study and research, but seldom do I start that way.

Sometimes it gets difficult, as I have had this tendency to enter or fall into strange and uncommon niches, often with limited availability of sources of data and knowledge compiled and shared by others before. When this happens, I tend to keep going ahead, invent my own way, sometimes even add to scholarship with my finds.

Therefore, not consciously knowing much about *alebrijes* or *cartonería*, that day in July, I start making a few.

I gather my materials, get set…

Shortly I notice something rather, ahem, weird. Almost scary, even.
It wasn’t as if my *brain* were going about the business, as much as it was the *hands themselves* picking up the glue paste, the bits of paper, putting things together, sort of... on their own? Autonomous-like?

It was almost as if my hands already *knew what they were doing!* As if they remembered some once well-honed but then long-lost skill, and now were enjoying the opportunity to show off...

I paused for a moment, to reflect. And from some dusty file of forgotten memory came snippets of my time as a kid actor.

That sounds, like, fancy? Well, let me tell ya' that a pre-teen thespian in 1975 Bolivia wasn't exactly given his own Airstream.

Being the *live-actor* component of a homespun, local Sesame Street TV show of puppets-and-live-action, in black-and-white *Canal 7*, the only TV channel in the country, meant also sweeping the puppet workshop, and such chores.

But note: *the puppet workshop*.

Too young to care about deeper things, *making,* I liked. Sweeping or memorizing my lines, not so much...

All arts at that time in Bolivia seemed to have some connection with Mexico City arts and crafts, one of the twin cultural beacons for Latin America, the other one being Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I guess that without knowing it, I was getting my apprenticeship of sorts in real *cartonería* from expert Bolivia puppeteers and most generous and caring teachers Jaime and Clara González of the *Taller Nacional de*

Teatro de Muñecos y Objetos Animados. Perhaps they had themselves learned this technique in Mexico. Years have passed. Many. Memories archived, dulled. But, when the right time came, *my hands remembered*.

Having regained peace at what seemed at first a strange turn of events, I now let the hands carry on, since they seemed to know what they were doing anyway, in this activity that turned out to be so natural to them...

Not stressed with *achieving,* creatures and components could also have a voice if I paid attention and let them gain their own shape, find balance, peace of either calm or spring-loaded tension, as each one called for.

Parts and pieces came together by following steps that turned out to be, when I got to study things later, very much those of classic *cartonería*. Using materials that otherwise would go to recycling or trash made complete sense, it's the way of the cartonero, in their case not so much by choice but out of necessity. Some of my attempts at innovation didn't quite work out, that was interesting, in itself.

What later became Dolpho hinted early that its shape was upside down from what I had planned at first. Bato asked to get dressed in a T-shirt. It was obvious that Pura Boca wasn't nice, intent on trying to eat our planet…

Where I come from

My mom was a classical-trained artist, and a natural at it. I mean, bohemian friends, School of Fine Arts, her kids able to cook or else, the works. Post-grads, several international. As a Ceramist pro, Yolanda studied in Buenos Aires, at the time one of two hubs of art and culture in Spanish-speaking America. Then in Czechoslovakia, the one place in the planet where fine artistic ceramics had gone further beyond one-shot wizardly craft into actual industrial production. Later in life, when a ceramics kiln was no longer available and her strength was waning, she transitioned into weaving, painting...

Way earlier, as a caring, patriotic young Bolivian, she also did her stint as a rural literacy teacher, in a time of hope in the opportunities that peoples had to pull themselves by their bootstraps, right before geniuses elsewhere noticed that more loot could be had when less developed countries have strife and stay poor, ignorant.

Many years later, having my parents for a visit in the days that I was Captain of the Merchant Marine in Lake Titicaca, in a rural location deep inside Aymara country, I was present when somehow Mom and some local ladies recognized each other from 50 years before.

May I hint that the word *amazing* doesn’t even begin to tell it, at all?

In her artistic creation, Yolanda often followed Andean First Nations themes and designs. She trained others in ceramics, reviving and practicing ancient techniques that by then were mostly lost, like *engobe* pottery. A public-school teacher (that's the kind of job an art degree can get you, be warned!), she cared, and achieved what could be achieved under the circumstances.

Accolades enough, trouble too, discrimination, as when she did not fall for the leftist and violent revolutionary leanings that were fashionable among her colleagues. Which made her, us, perfect expendable cover for a certain Cuban-German communist agent pretending to be an artist (she called me her *bärchen*, it is told).

At the *1964 First World Congress of Craftsmen* in New York City, during her opening remarks, Mrs. Vanderbilt welcomed the participants, praising the fine examples of their work that they had brought with them. According to an oft-repeated family oral legend, she said something along the lines of how none of those works were as beautiful as what the Bolivian representative had brought. The Bolivian representative was Yolanda, who had by her side her 6-month-old baby boy. Me.
Much, much fun was had by all.

Eventually I have come to realize that my dad was an artist too, by nature, but someone had to hold a real job, right?
They both worked, hard, before two-wage families be-

came standard, because of our expensive passions: education; learning; books.

I was a latchkey kid way before that was at all fashionable.

My not even yet teen classmates envied my key… I had no idea at the time that, in Bolivia, a *coming of age* event takes place the moment that a young male receives a key to the house, an implicit permission to party late, because public, community drunkenness is an essential component of social bonding, starting young.

Therefore, not drinking will single you out of most career advancement. That was us. Yay.

Yolanda also taught many years as a temp with not much advancement in the Fine Arts College in La Paz, the *Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes*, besides her public-school jobs. Yes, several.

Sometimes after my German classes at the *Goethe Institut* of La Paz I would walk there, at the end of her day, so we could go home together, one hour away with public transportation, often standing all the way, at rush hours the buses were quite full and overflowing.

Waiting next to the human skeleton in the *Bellas Artes* office, reading, I was a much-admired kid for my quiet.

Seldom did I get to see the workshops.

Many years later, in 2017, I am failing at *intaglio* printing. Since you asked, let me tell you that good intaglio involves some wizardry. I ask my sister, “any idea why Mom didn’t take me to visit the workshops at Bellas Artes? I would have learned so much!” Her answer, “It was actually on purpose. She didn’t want you to become an artist.”

Yikes.

Well, can’t be helped now, I guess.

Thereabouts the time by the late 1980s that I did a huge exhibit about Geography, with plenty free-hand, impromptu cardboard and paper sculpture, Mom, a Carrara, Italy-trained marble sculptor besides everything else, began saying, “the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree,” while giving me the cutest smirk.

She passed in ‘13, before I got into papermaking or engravings or my *alebrijes*.

One thing that was totally clear and evident in both my parents, more intensely with my Mom, was the appreciation and respect for what she called *art naïf*.

My Dad’s core sink of much effort and dedication was learning and sharing about *appropriate technology*, how people can do amazing things, for themselves and for their country, with those resources that they already have on hand.

Between one thing and another, seldom do I have any doubt on being able to replicate what has ever been done already.

Figuring out the *how* of things becomes pleasant sport, involving brain, hand-skills, persistence. Ignorance about *the specifics* of a given established process is sometimes almost an advantage, as I am not fenced in or limited by tradition. And I totally love to *share*.

While I never completed my Engineering degree, every time I face cartonería I feel that *cartón piedra* is essentially a *composite material*, paper and engrudo taking the place of a fiber matrix plus adhesive, similar in many ways to the fancier stuffs that we make aircraft and spaceships with.

I always face it also with a deep feeling of *togetherness* with the craftsmen that did it, that do it, a meaning for com-*passion*, a shared eagerness, both the archaic sad meaning of *passion* and the uplifting, intense feeling.

I know I am no better than a dilettante when it comes to cartonería, a savvy one perhaps, but they? They were, they are real people.

Facing page: Yama learns shapes, textures, materials, and appreciation for crafts.
At a market in La Paz, Bolivia, c.1965

STEAM-ed alebrijes

Having been employed as a teacher for over 16 years, I’ve lived and learned many things not well covered in the coursework for my degrees in education.

Among the most important of those insights is that you *never* can *teach* anything. At best, you can provide a good environment and resources whence some kids and grownups can *learn*. The *agricultural method*: plant a seed, provide a good growing environment, some water. Now, stand back, and be *amazed*.

I’ve had much fun. My students and I seemed to especially enjoy so-called Science classes. The realization that real science learning rather seldom shows up in the classroom might be why I have this tendency to see opportunities everywhere else to learn and understand and try sharing science, technology, related facts and skills.

Alebrijes being no exception, I insistently mention elsewhere how *cartón piedra* is a most excellent *composite material*. I leave it to the student teacher to research further what that means and be suitably convinced.

Leaving aside the silly of STEAM vs. STEM, both being at best buzzwords with little useful content besides a chance to ask for more tax money, let me point out that *cartón piedra* offers nice opportunities to play with rather meaningful actual science concepts.

Beyond the *composite material* angle, we have the intersection of a mesh skeleton with a light, strong, affordable, and versatile skin shell: think boats, airfoils, constructions of every kind, mimicking geodesic domes, truss structures, and *way* beyond.

En Calavera tells of that occasion when an organizer for a Chinese Festival asked Felipe Linares to fix or replace a damaged large dragon head for their traditional event. When the client got back the result, he was surprised at how much lighter and stronger the *cartonería* piece was, compared to the original, perhaps weak papier-mâché.

The teachers of advanced engineering concepts, such as composite materials, face challenges when bringing their subject come alive. Usually they are limited to theory or some pictures or videos. Their students seldom get to *make* much, unless they are seriously wealthy or seriously careless, because working with “real life” composites tends to be expensive and toxic, and expensive several times again to keep it safe. Carbon fiber is the worst, highly dangerous despite its fashionable appeal, and even fiberglass and polyester resins are inconvenient, needing extra precautions. No good for kids.

Instead of those, with paper and school glue or paste you have *safe, affordable composites for the classroom.* Push it to 11, by using waterproof glue, and make a boat with newspaper!

City of Austin cultural arts

Then, sometime in 2018, Yama lists alebrijes among his themes and activities for a City of Austin arts grant, a proposal considered during the qualification stage as almost *too ambitious.*

Which, in hindsight, turns out to be *almost* accurate. And this book wasn't even part of it at the time…

Inclusive, based on peer evaluation, open, until ideology slowed its dynamism the City of Austin had an amazing program of funding for cultural arts.

That word, *arts*, nags me; as a paper maker, I consider myself a *craftsman*, and would love to be appreciated as such. However, reality is that pretty much nobody cares for US handmade paper in this day and age. Evidence shows that Arts Schools prefer to pay more for machine-made paper coming from Europe than for US handmade. So, to apply for grants, I must reinvent myself as an *artist*. Which I am, of course, for crying out loud I've been doing art forever! That happens to you when you are loved by, and blessed to breathe the same air, and eat the food made by *real artists*.

Only remains to figure out what kind of *art* will I do, and how I will share it.

Thus, I go big. I'm a Texan now, that's how we do things here, right?

Wide horizons, yay!

As a warm up, in ’17 an art-for-the-blind project, a high-relief book and a 10-foot sculpture, replicating the famous *Aztec Calendar* in papercrete, which, by the way, is another *composite material.*

Then Year One of Core funding, *Chinese calligraphy*, *Amazonian tree-bark cloth,* plus *Forbidden Papermaking of Colonial Spanish America.* Researching for this latter, I seem to have uncovered some data hitherto unknown to historians: a clock-face watermark never recorded before. Year Two, *Alebrijes de Austin!*, *Amate paper of Mesoamerica*, and *The First Colors*, this latter being an exploration of those most ancient pigments that are a common heritage to all human peoples and nations, everywhere.

Too ambitious. Yeah, sure! ☺

Important motivators: find, explore, share cross-culturally, listen, learn. Figure out how things change, how they stay the same, how they have meaning and meanings for peoples from many places, most especially those who have found their home in Austin.

I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities given to me by the City of Austin, and I work hard so my community gets good value in return. The program they ran was one of the most transparent and open in the nation, encouraging both innovation and steady quality work.

This project is supported in part by the Cultural Arts Division of the City of Austin Economic Development Department.

Cultural Arts
CITY OF AUSTIN
ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT

It feels good here.

Once again, another artist statement

From time to time I have had to submit an artist statement. Doing so hasn't yet made much of a difference in my life as far as I know, no big commissions or contracts or mucho fame and dinero yet as a result, but the introspective exercise sometimes feels like good wholesome family fun.

A complication I often encounter when writing these, is my insecurity regarding the *artsy*, or not, nature of my work and production.

As a craftsman, as a paper maker, as an inventive technologist artisan, I am pleasantly, at home, floating in my warm vat of stuff. As an artist…

Oh, well.

Suffice it to say that, as far as I am concerned, the *Alebrijes de Austin!* made themselves.

The brain mostly contributed Old Country proverbs, for example, *owning a full box of Crayolas doesn't mean you must use every color*, and such precious wit and wisdom of the Ancients.

We'll be better off meeting the Alebrijes, than paying more attention to me, so, let's go!

Tres *Alebrijes de Austin!*

By the way, even though I hold no intention to trademark the label, *Alebrijes de Austin!* properly carries an exclamation point, which drives my spellchecker crazy when I use that in midsentence. Let's also remember that Don Pedro says he heard *¡alebrijes! ¡alebrijes!*, notice the upside-down exclamation point used in Spanish.

With that taken care of, we can now properly answer why they are three.

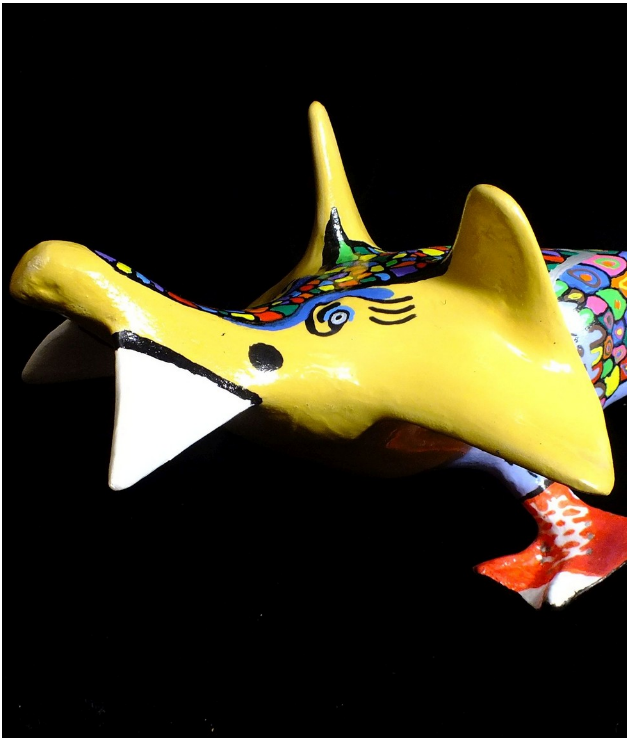
Three.

No less, no more.

Were you to ask me about this evident, accountable fact during a televised interview, and hopefully your name is Jane, I would answer,

> *you know, Jane, that is a very good question, that doesn't really have one simple answer.*
>
> *Let me say that their number is not as important as what they represent, which is lasting hope for friendship and understanding between the peoples of Mexico and the United States.*

Note the *fashionable* use of *you know*, that some feel constitutionally mandated to insert multiple times per radio or TV interview, even, yikes, at each sentence...



Dolpho Duckodillo

In some ways my favorite, for his gentleness, and just it being a stress-free time as he got his shape and finish.

Yes, I see your question, do alebrijes have gender? In Spanish, all nouns have gender, and an abstract notion like “alebrije” would default to “masculine” grammatical gender, not necessarily “male”, the final “e” not forcing things either way. In English, we would go for “it”, not a good option in Spanish. I guess that designating a gender is not required, but the names themselves, with that “o” ending, have tended to be male, except perhaps Pura Boca, and that one is confrontational and different in many ways, including some disputed points of grammar related to his name ending in “a”, which would be “feminine”, but not so fast...

Since we started with this subject, let me share that naming them happened later in the process, before painting, but already with their final features, as I got help from my sister, Solveiga Ploskonka, who shared with me some great insights that now I can’t remember.

Early on I had some idea regarding which real animals would contribute parts to each alebrije, but that ended up having some variations, as it should.

Dolpho is a play on words between the word *dolphin*, as that wonderful creature sort of contributed the flipper-like appendages and a sleek, swim-worthy shape, and the Spanish male name, *Adolfo*, which was the closest homophonic, *similar-sounding* word.

Then, his webbed feet are obviously those of a duck. And the frontal part of the body and snout were supposed to be very much from an arma*dillo,* but then the shape-to-be-called-Dolpho asked to be flipped upside-down. His narrow snout and nose remain, now pointing up. *Dillo* he stays, either way.

We had just watched *Nanny McPhee* on the day before I started work on Dolpho's paint, so a wart was added but then seemed to register in the brain as an eye. Problem. The early eyes were more sleek, Egyptian-like, but now needed extra work. The fangs are just a nice-to-have.

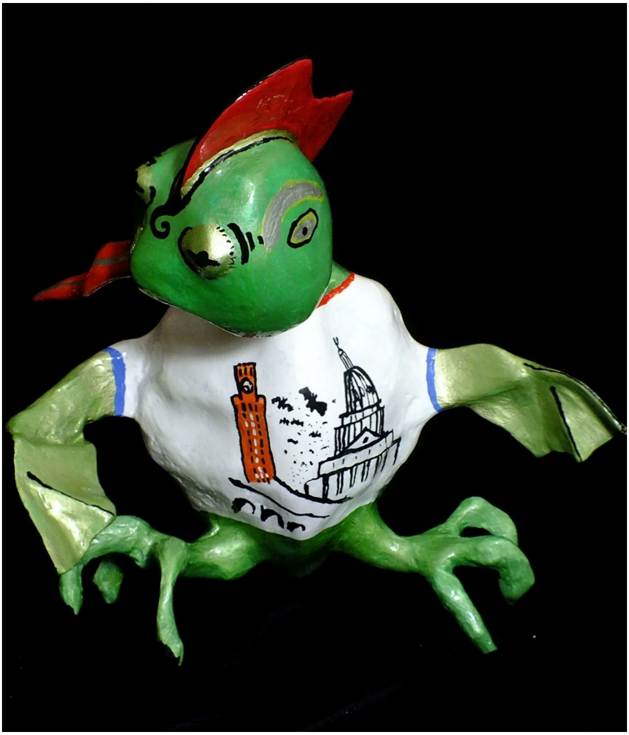
I'm quite happy about the red collectible Converse All-Stars sneakers he's wearing, and so is he. I had a pair when they were the most common kind a kid could wear, mine were probably knock-offs. I sort of wanted to work the threads in the sole, but let it have its peace. As a technology aside, getting him to stand well on his feet required repeat adjustment. The *Alebrijes de Austin!* were originally meant to hang from threads, suspended in the air. It was sort of conceding to reality and marketability that they also needed to be able to stand on their own, which, conveniently enough, was the way they actually ended up being displayed.

Which brings us to that *feo, muy feo* alebrije fact in the room, how much do the potential commercial prospects of a piece influence the artist making it?

I would say that for an undiscovered, much skilled artist (Me! Me! Me!), it matters a lot. An unskilled artist don’t care, and probably the chances for him, or for someone with an MFA, or for someone naturally brilliant to make it to the very top artists rankings are about the same. Artist success is 95% luck, 48% effort, plus about 120% luck. Making something that has a better chance to *sell now* becomes a bit of a priority, until we get there.

This affected Dolpho. A sleek, extremely smooth plaster base body with fine surface finish, then a clear-coat, deep medium-gloss varnish looks great, but neither is the way of classic *cartonería*, where finish is often just a layer of white paint followed with a quick color chaser, hold the varnish.

Pedro Linares knew he was unto something special, different. Perhaps the real day of birth for *artistic* alebrijes was the time when he used some varnish to finish some peculiar-looking *judas*. That old varnish has yellowed, as seen in Masuoka’s pictures and in the piece attributed to him that I saw in the *Museo de Arte Popular*. It’s only *my* presumption that dares guess it really is linseed. I mean, I know linseed, I can almost smell it in those photos, but we don’t *have* the full set of facts.



Bato Zopollote

While Dolpho is dressed in some of the more traditional Linares-inspired alebrije repetitive motifs of eye-inside-eye scales, Bato, *bah-toh*, right away wanted to have his own look and personality, away from tradition.

Making his own Austin tradition, actually.
My earliest declared description for *Alebrijes de Austin!* shares my intention, in an email, to follow Pedro Linares, cartonero de oficio, and then, *make it Austin*. I did mention several local icons, especially the Austin bats, the Texas armadillo, HiHowAreYou, a guitar...

I am not sure if the T-shirt was my own idea, or did that come from Deb, or Sol? The concept later did impress several people, even myself when I realized that *clothing* an alebrije is innovative. I like innovative.

A T-shirt turned out to be most convenient for including other iconic symbols of true-blue Austinhood, like the Congress Bridge itself and not just its bats, the Texas Capitol, the burnt-orange UT Tower. I guess that the Hi How Are You? mural that appears on Bato's back would deserve to become an alebrije someday, in its own right.

So. Bato is a nice play on words between *vato*, a Mexicanism that translates pretty well as *dude*, and the migrant short-tailed Mexican *bat*, that most iconic wild creature of Austin's downtown, especially abundant in nests under the Congress Avenue bridge. Watching them take flight at dusk is something not to be missed when you come a-visiting.

Zopollote went through spelling revisions before settling on that one. *Pollo* is obvious, a chicken, when Bato’s body started as a rather accurate rotisserie chicken shape, which just happened that way from the original coat hanger and some newspaper bundles, not from something planned beforehand. *Zopilote* is the Mexican word for a buzzard, another Austin native, which fits also regarding the shape of the claws. These could have been an eagle’s but didn’t need to be.

I did play with a spelling of *Tzotlpollote*, the etymology saying that *tzotl* is a Nahuatl word meaning rubbish, filth. But one, it wouldn’t be cool to use that kind of speech, and two, nobody would get it, even were I brainless enough to try. Zopollote was a much better solution here.

The batrachian-like, Kermit-The-Frog face just happened, but needed *something*, thus the bifid tongue.

Just happened that way has been a common theme, and that does not mean there wasn’t a lot of work involved. Most often what took place was that some semi-random shape started to *look* like something, free-association-like. Following work to *achieve* that was not trivial.

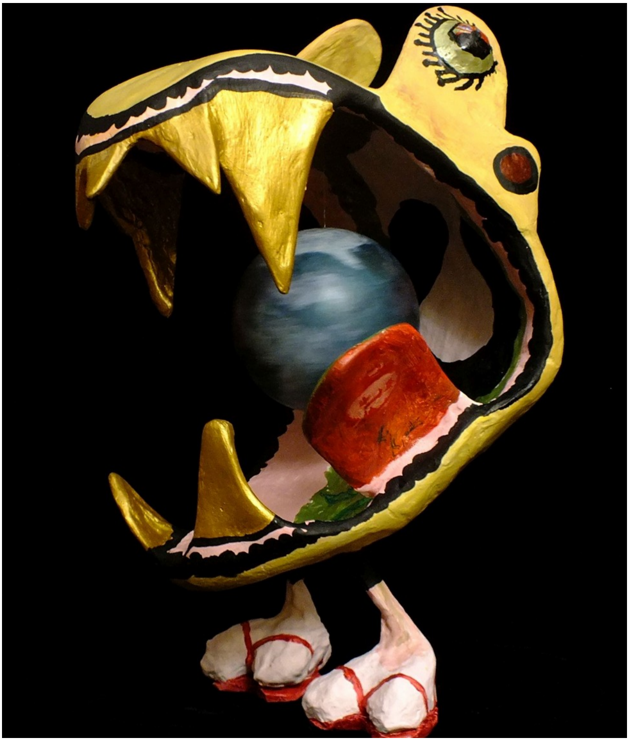
While Dolpho was clearly a gentle creature, Bato had a harder time showing his nice side, thus certain details became necessary, like the *robacorazón*, meaning *heart robber*, which is what I thought for years was the name for that curly strand of hair in the forehead, part of the standard look of *flamenco* dancers. Then the cute little mustache. Fake eyes on the side of the head, the kind that make predators confused when you're asleep, and the HiHowAreYou creature in the back.

I didn't plan it when I started coloring, but the amphibian green skin, plus the red rooster comb, continuing dinosaur-like down his back, with the white T-shirt in between, all together add up to make an impeccable green-white-red combination matching the Mexico flag colors.

Yes, Bato is totally 100% Austin, but just like many other 100% true Austinites that happen to have been born south of the Rio Grande, he's got *cultura* in him.

I feel that Bato is the most *alive* of my *Alebrijes de Austin!*

Dolpho is just too nice and calm.
Pura Boca, not nice, overloaded with symbols.
Bato? He looks good from any angle, can be set to be suspended as if doing somersaults, or stand up in either of two different stances. He has some sort of clothing, and so full of tropes!
Yes, he's an Austinite, our Bato dude.



Pura Boca, *en sincero homenaje al DS 3973*

On July 9, 2019, Evo Morales Ayma, President of Bolivia, approved the Decreto Supremo 3973, allowing crops and cattle *in communal lands*. A Presidential Decree, not even reviewed by his rubber-stamp Congress.

He was preparing for another reelection even though forbidden to do so by the Constitution. The Constitution had never yet been much of an obstacle to him, those term limits can be edited or reinterpreted, as necessary. His handlers did it already. Thrice. Despite a Referendum, that they lost. Because, you know what? *Reelection is a basic Human Right*. Should you need to know it, human rights are above the Constitution!

While the wording of that decree 3973 is VERY unclear, as should fit any piece of law during Morales' regime, it was understood by friends and foes alike as opening to agriculture, thus slash and burn in preparation, over 4 million hectares (about 10 million acres) of land that formerly had been at least semi-protected. This surface area is equivalent *to the whole of Switzerland*.

Many big and small interests want that land to be put into production. Directly, tens of thousands of poor peasants. Then, hidden behind weaselly layers of intermediaries, international Big Food. While burning land in August has been for generations a stupid agricultural practice in Bolivia, and all over South America and especially in Africa, this year it got much, much worse with the drought. Way beyond the Amazonia, the one area that for a short moment received some attention by worldwide news media.

Traditionally, Bolivian *communal lands* were for grazing and gathering, not available for sale or agriculture, having some minor protections. Not much, but massive open and wide slash-and-burn was not quite OK there, mostly avoided. Except of course by coca growers, big supporters of Morales, who has been their syndicate leader before and while being president, their main clients not being much into following the rule of law.

The idiom *Pura Boca* means about the same as *Big Mouth*, what would be said of someone whose discourse is vapid, insincere. Mr. Morales had made a name for himself as The First Native American President, and, as such, supposedly an uncompromising protector of Mother Earth.

Sure.

His policies have not achieved a change away from the rawest modes of unsustainable exploitation of raw resources in Bolivia, and there appear to be good evidence that his government never even tried something better for real, not a framework for common folk to build on.

Industry, manufacture, initiative are discouraged, instead opting for government-led capricious megaprojects that, when actually implemented, leave permanent scars even visible from satellite images, the corresponding shell-company partners leaving the country once they took as much as they could plunder with seldom any oversight. His *populist* support came by brilliant handling of his image as supposed defender of the poor and downtrodden, which did resonate strongly with the poorest of the poor in Bolivia, too many at any time.

Impressive news-release-only projects are often contracted without competitive bidding or realistic expectations of any economic or environmental sustainability.

While natural gas had paid for some relative prosperity during his early years in government, including some real advances in sanitation, health and liquidity, what *growth* has continued to be claimed in recent times is mostly expenditures through an amazing increase in public debt. And public image. Even the bags of peanuts handed to passengers of the Bolivian airline had a picture of him, covered with marker now he's gone.

When faced with a tired electorate that this time was refusing to bend over once again, it is easy to understand how it seemed like a good way to get votes to gift millions of acres to unhappy poor farmers, those that hadn't so far profited from the clout of the coca growers union.

Can you blame them? Just like the copal tree hunters, *each* peasant doesn't want much. Each one just wants a *little* more, *now*. From sharing a tractor, what about now maybe a chance to own one?

From each individual's own understanding, how can it be that a hungry peasant's growing acreage toward higher production of cash crops would be such a problem? Of course, they want to burn it right away, take ownership and stake *their* plot, immediately after Morales and viceprez Linera have their event "gifting" peasants the land, *as if it were theirs to give*. Before someone takes notice and protects the land back. Meanwhile, massive agribusiness interests celebrate, as cheap feed for cattle promises to be more abundant. It was peculiar that enormous earth-moving machinery showed up to help *prepare the land*, not really the kind of equipment that a hungry peasant might have access to?

When tens of thousands of those peasants start burning hundreds of thousands of acres of virgin lands, especially in the drier areas, that fire can get out of control. And it did.

Besides, I have not known Bolivian peasants to care much for tree cover or species diversity, or any of those environmental luxuries that we say that we want, here, while coveting what they produce, there.
Burn it all! Who cares?

If saying so was clearly politically incorrect before, it is hard now for even the staunchest natives-know-better to deny that virgin lands left without oversight or protection will be turned into pasture and crops, not just in Bolivia. Coca growers are doing it, mighty interests and corporations are doing it, why shouldn't poor peasants?

Is there a solution? Perhaps, but a will for responsible administration of the nation has not been there, in Mr. Morales' regime, or here in the USA. His policies tend to be identical, even though earlier by a few years, to those of another much more famous political figure today that we own. Or owns us?

Meaning, a discourse and ideology to encourage and spur those having some sort of grudge. Invoke a feeling of being left behind; to blame some other country for your own problems; to spend without looking at the consequences. Xenophobia, tariffs? Of course.

Make it harder, more expensive for immigrants, even for tourists? Certainly! To tweet irrationally? Oh yay!

Likewise, the pretend early success in the economy started to wear thin as obviously it was not sustainable, the emptiness inside more noticeable, and then Morales' political future goes up in smoke, together with millions of wildlife dead and virginal forest land in actual flames through now legal, widespread electioneering arson.

It is sad, pathetic, to hear the news. How President Morales was dressed up by a new PR team in a blue jump suit, staging a photo-op pretending to be a fire-fighter. As things get worse, having first refused international aid, his regime then has to accept it when it is evident that his advisers have no idea what to do, and likely would need to put some effort to care even less.

Meanwhile, many volunteer youths have been flocking to the fire areas. With just their heart to prepare them, little to no equipment, essentially out of a simple, true, patriotic, apolitical desire. To save some of what they have been told since they were babies that was the very most valuable thing to protect for themselves and for others, as their heritage, as their responsibility.
Their Mother Earth. Their Pachamama. Now burning.

Sigh.

OK, back to Pura Boca…

I had mentioned that there was a bit of a grammar issue with that name. In Spanish, *boca* ends in “a”, thus a feminine noun. Adjectives should accord in gender with their nouns. However, *pura* is **not** an adjective here, as in *pure*, an adverb instead, as in *purely, totally*. The adverbial idiom here should be spelled *Puro Boca*, the gender of the expression itself grammatically irrelevant despite that “o” ending. Yet, that level of culture would be too much to ask of Mr. Morales, who actually has used this wrong spelling, *Pur**a** Boca*, in his tweets. It fits to leave it that way, misspelled and gender confused. Which also corresponds, as Mr. Morales satisfies his populist audience with a suitable bigoted attitude toward gender issues, freer of some constraints the long-lost twin faces here. So different, yet so much the same!

Conceptually, in its essence, Pura Boca is not so much an *alebrije* as it is a *judas*, the kind of *cartonería* figure to represent the evil in current affairs. It does not portray Mr. Morales himself, instead the sad circumstances in Morales' Bolivia. Its evil is not a calculating, clever one, but rather exists from simpler, baser motivations.

It just wants. More. *More*.

That planet? Burning? I like hot, *picante* food!

The inside of the mouth is covered with coca leaves. This medicinal plant had been reserved for sacred, ceremonial purposes in times of the Inka. Somehow the Spaniards realized how coca chewing made their newly found laborers work harder and complain less. Thus, continuously chewing coca became a normal practice, even one to be proud of ethnically, forgetting its actual sacred origins. Later, cocaine became a substantial source of income for foreigners and locals. Growing coca expanded, officially discouraged by the USA while still being one of its main clients.

Pushing against any sort of restrictions is the too rich and powerful coca-growers union of which Mr. Morales is the president, ascertaining early his profile there of a *puro boca* enemy of the USA, while happy enough to take those drug dollars, as noted in the top of the tongue.

Does the underside of the tongue portray a 100-Renmimbi note, or a 100 Pesos Bolivianos one? The confusion is valid, both have about similar cash value and red color. Chinese business capitals have taken over a lot of the Bolivian raw materials exploitation, while obviously becoming entirely enmeshed with national power, debt, economics.

Gold teeth is something that you see mostly among the more prosperous market-stall vendors in Bolivia, intent in showing-off wealth through the tradition of having their front teeth cosmetically sheathed in that metal.

The copper rings behind the eyes are earplugs, welded shut to avoid listening to reason. The twisted backbone explains itself, the squares being part of a complex ancient decorative motif, incomplete here.

A red dot on top of the head is to commemorate the visit to Houston by President Modi of India, who wants Hinduism privilege forced onto that diverse and multi-ethnic nation. Let’s say this was circumstantial drive-by *judas* design, with Modi being in the news at the moment I was coloring Pura Boca in ochers.

The orange head? No comments.

A levitating Earth about to be swallowed shows fire, under dense plumes of thick smoke, in South America and especially Africa. If you look closely, you may realize that Antarctica is *up*, thus the Earth is hanging *upside down?*

In fact, there is no *up* or *down* in space, savvy? For Bolivians, the Southern Cross is “up”.

I’m not too happy about having made *Pura Boca* a sort of evil character. I don’t think he means it (interesting, in having some pity, I just gendered him), but his nature is to grab and grab, and the Earth is available…

Because we here in the US and Europe, and China and the others catching up fast, consume much more than Bolivians do, maybe any attempt at blaming Bolivians of burning the Amazon and the Chiquitanía for big business interests on purpose by accident should *also* consider our own guilt and change in our own evil ways?

Bato and *Dolpho* are cute, *Pura Boca* has his cute aspects too. In this case, the red *ojotas*, sort of leather and tire rubber sandal together with the pink two-toe feet and black short pants belong to *Condorito*, a gentle and funny Chilean comic book character that I grew up with.

I did not varnish *Pura Boca*, in keeping with his classic, social-conflict-engaged *judas* narrative.

The Central Library exhibit

While my interest for *cartonería* is part of a wider exploration of all things paper and their cultural context, the three *Alebrijes de Austin!* were specifically made to be part of an exhibit of LatinX crafts at the Central Library of Austin, within the *Paper Connections* project with partial funding from the City of Austin Economic Development Department.

As such, Jieun Kim, Exhibit Coordinator for the Central Library, elegantly set them in a glass case, between some masterfully made Oaxaca wood alebrijes belonging to collectors in Austin, in a hallway of much traffic in the first floor of the library. You couldn’t miss them if you went to the bathrooms or the art gallery there.

Those times that I proudly visited that library I always met people looking at the colorful exhibit, that ran from September 1st to December 31st, 2019.

I am glad that people enjoyed my alebrijes. As an up and coming *very* famous artist-to-be, having some of my artwork be part of such a nice, professionally set, well visited exhibit is certainly A Good Thing.

My gratitude to Jieun Beth Kim, to the Central Library staff, and to the visitors.

Digging deeper

Most alebrije happenings take place in Mexico City, these creatures being such a *chilango* tradition, yet some top-notch cartoneros and alebrijeros work from other places in Mexico, even elsewhere.

Some gigantic alebrijes have made their way to France, but it is unclear if they made any inroads there. Americans seem satisfied with the carved wood variant.

Websites, blogs, social media pages come and go, little advice can be given to guide you regarding what to look for, besides searches for *alebrijes* and *cartonería*, then of course most of the material online is in Spanish, though intriguing little snippets about the interaction between alebrijes and modern culture and art show up in English Wikipedia articles.

One going deep into the subject today would want to follow the yearly *Encuentro de Cartoneros*, also the international contest *Presea Pedro Linares*, most certainly the *Desfile de Alebrijes Monumentales*.

And, of course, check from time to time what PapelTexano.org is up to, also search online for *papel texano alebrijes*. I have not found yet many researchers or practitioners of *cartonería* or alebrijes in English-speaking lands. Maybe you could become one of us?

Leticia, cartonera in Columbus, OH

As the galley for this book was already sent to print, I get to chat with Leticia Vázquez-Smith, an artisan regularly practicing and teaching cartonería in the *Cultural Arts Center* of Columbus, Ohio. In that city, she ran *Frida Katrina Mexican Folk Art*, a *loncheria* restaurant doubling as art gallery, displaying the work from Mexican cartoneros alongside her own.

One meaningful overall take away for me is that there must be a lot of Good Things going on that we haven't heard from yet, deserving discovery.

Our conversation was solid with shared feelings for *cartonería*, as you may imagine. Essentially impossible to condense into one page, deserving more work later.

Right now I will just mention that Mrs. Vázquez-Smith's artistry is firmly grounded in cultural traditions from Mexico, while mine isn't. She indicates an interest in techniques that I am bringing to cartonería from my family background in ceramics and pottery. She has studied the life and work of Carmen Caballero in depth, about which I am quite curious. While keeping connections with the USA, her family intends to relocate to Cancún, Mexico, where she will continue her work, duly registered as an *artesana* there.

Many bases here for further collaboration!

“Culture wording” apologies

All over this book I say *Mexican* this, *Mexican* that. Other words of that type also, the kind used to separate people and label them, a make-believe that *some people* are *different* from *other people*, and therefore deserving or denied some privilege, allowed to talk or not, work, create, participate. Discrimination by artificial labels.

Balderdash! I’m so sorry to have been part of that!

Obviously, “all *people* are created equal” is in the best case a simplification. We all *know*, or should know, that every single *individual* is a *unique Creation*, one of a kind. Those who have heard me talk when I am on my soap-box might be bored by now regarding how I consider intentional “one-size-fits-all” schooling to be forcing what cannot be forced, a crime against humanity.

Racism is inherently the worst example of artificial labeling. Racism is utterly abhorrent, evil, a dark, abysmal disgrace made worse by the light of perverted good intentions. *All men are created equal* has been inaccurate, yet is the best thing we have to guide us away from hate disguised as reason, or even “science”. This all begins by idiotically labeling people by so-called *culture, national origin*, ancestry or skin color. Wrong! Stop!

I’m not correcting what I wrote so far, leaving it as is, to humbly show how even I ***must*** keep learning.

Some sources

This is not an academic book, so I will not call this list a bibliography. Yet, perhaps you do enjoy following things up and learning more, like I do, so let me recommend some easier to find quality documents.

- *En Calavera: the papier-mâché art of the Linares family.* Susan N. Masuoka, 1994, 176 p.
    - *Artful sculptors of whimsy.* S. Masuoka 1995 shorturl.at/tGU18 best 3-page internet English article, an abstract of *En Calavera*, free.
- The 1975 Bronowski-Grant documentary, *Pedro Linares, artesano cartonero*, with subtitles, youtu.be/eUpOWFBVadI
    - Regarding Bronowski's motivations: *afana.org/bronowski.htm*
- *lugaresdemexico.com/quema-judas.html* is perhaps the best brief internet article that I have found about contemporary *cartonería*
- wikipedia.org Miss_Lupita_project
- *Mexican Cartonería: Paper, Paste, and Fiesta*, Leigh Thelmadatter, November 2019
    - Many Wikipedia articles about Mexico crafts have been initiated or edited by Mrs. Thelmadatter, a resident of Mexico City.

Lost sources

Copyright is not a victimless crime. I haven’t been able to get close to certain sources holding important data, it’s even unclear if any copy survives at all. If you do have such access, please, can you share?

- The other Bronowski documentaries. Worldcat says there might be one copy of one of them in a library in Juneau, Alaska, and of one other in Fairbanks. I love this interest in Mexican crafts in Alaska, but, c’mon!
- *El imaginativo mundo de los Linares* by Victor Inzua Canales. Perhaps in some university library in Mexico.

Buying alebrijes

I know of no online or brick-and-mortar shop in the US or elsewhere outside of Mexico that carries real paper alebrijes. Wood carved ones, easy, even museum gift shops in Austin have some. Cartonería, not even in those museum *collections*, that I know of.

If you are interested, I guess you can always contact me, not just for my alebrijes, but also figure out somehow how to help other alebrijeros sell.

etsy.com/shop/TXPaper

Prof. Mtro. Yamandú Zavish Ploskonka y Rivas, DSLL

Yama was born in La Paz, Bolivia. *Home* has also been Santiago, Dominican Republic and Minas, Uruguay, before settling for good in Austin, Texas, next to his Deb.

Planning a career in *experiential education* to follow 18 years as a classroom teacher, instead he got into volunteering, and several business ventures with not much success, yet. These generally were linked to science, outdoors, electronics, hands-on activities, education, often all of that bundled together.

Initially seeking affordable good quality paper to print engravings in 2016, he started making paper by hand, then sharing paper-related cultural expressions. For example, this quest now after *cartonería* and alebrijes.

He intends that some day Papel Texano will become an Austin, Texas, active community non-profit hub for paper making and the sharing of paper traditions, of which there are many, each one fascinating.

Since becoming a professional papermaker, he presented at the 2016 *Friends of Dard Hunter* conference, and was most recently the editor of the *2019 International Swatch Swap Yearbook*, a post he will fill again in 2020.

He works from *a carport workshop fixin' to become a cottage industry.*

Cartonería and Alebrijes

a How-To classroom handbook for DIY Mexican paper-mâché art and sculpture

Soon coming to you: *the first ever book in English bringing to life this most exciting Mexican craft as a do-it-yourself manual. Designed for the teacher or hobbyist, with extensive, detailed step-by-step instructions, and many, many color pictures.*

It so happens that some reviewers of the book you are holding now were a tad confused about my current mix of a very personal memoir tone meshed together with sharing the technical steps of making *cartonería* and even a chronicle of current events far away. Perhaps too much. Also, a request for more color… I think all of that is fair. Thus, a more single-focus book will be needed.

Meanwhile, I keep making paper, and prints. My short-term projects were to do reprints of ancient engravings, most specially the 1507 maps by Waldseemüller, and *The Small Passion* of Albrecht Dürer. Real press engraving, on real handmade paper, yay! All that got delayed. Covid...

Instead, I am already well past 100 pages of another manuscript, *THE ACT OF ROBOTIC CREATION, a personal inquiry about the process of innovation where humans and machines meet.*

Busy busy busy.

The Moral, if any

Sometimes I get too wordy, and perhaps people miss what I am really trying to say because of it. Just in case, let me try to be explicit about a *bottom line, meaningful* message, an old-fashioned *moral*.

Crafts are dying. Mostly because machines, also because cheaper labor elsewhere. Let's do something.

Transforming a *craft* into an *art* works to some extent but *changes* the creature: a true *craft* is anonymous, its resulting product a useful *commodity*, perhaps also pretty, or not. Meanwhile, *art*, in the modern sense of the word, delivers a limited number of *collectible* items *valued* by their provenance attached to an accredited, famous, and celebrated *name*. Prices seem to go up, while both production and practitioners become scarce.

The former craftsman, now an artist, will modify the product and process when bending to the expectations of his richer public, while the simpler, cheap anonymous expendable, utilitarian objects of craft go extinct.

Except as stunts. And I dare say so, self-deprecatingly, because I do those stunts also.

I like reenactment. I find a brought-back-to-life lost-craft stunt to be totally OK, enjoyable, perhaps still able partially to deliver deeper values and meaning of otherwise *mostly dead* crafts. Can *true love* fix things?

Real *cartonería*, as any other craft, depends on an ecosystem. You lose the ecosystem; then the creature cannot survive on its own. Not *sustainable*. Perhaps there is still some utilitarian real-life *cartonería* alive in Mexico, and my heart goes to those cartoneros. Hard work with little pay or appreciation.

Elsewhere, including Austin, making old-fashioned *cartonería* is much like a Renaissance Fair performance. It's *edutainment*. Pandas in zoos.

I like pandas, I like sustainable, but real *crafts* are not. I mean, sustainable as in a self-standing job, with a decent income. Perhaps there is a chance to do *cartonería just like it used to be*, in technique and materials, but it will happen for fun and games, out of context, from an excess of time and resources, with some sort of subsidy where the value is not in the object produced itself, but rather in the event, a performance, the shared activity, the opportunity to live *cultura*. Good Things, all that.

I would say that there are much worse ways to spend your extra time or somebody's money!

Do go forth, make some *cartonería*. Make *alebrijes de your-own-place*.

Think of how you are part of a tradition of humanity, one with deep roots. And pass it on, encourage others.

Help restart an ecosystem? *That* would be awesome!

More recent Bolivia news

The Chiquitanía fires got started when Evo Morales, running for an unconstitutional fourth term as President of Bolivia, removed protection on hundreds of thousands of acres of virgin lands in his attempt to increase voter support, as his handlers well knew his share was going to be much lower than ever before.

How was he running if it was unconstitutional to do so? Well, what do you expect from a self-proclaimed socialist with a super-majority? Years ago, he was very popular, enough to *make* the rules *and* appoint *and* control the tribunals that oversee those rules. Didn't last forever.

Because of now overwhelming opposition, a referendum had to be held in February 2019, to rule on his claim to run again. Despite losing it, he ran anyway.

Things ended up badly. Fraud was massive, much of it so obvious and blatant that the people rose in protest. Things got worse; Morales' handlers had much to lose, resorting to arson, assassination, and violent reprisals. Large sums were spent on international media to twist the story, you probably were fed some of that by our "press". Eventually he resigned, tried to renege on the resignation, finally fled, to Mexico, expecting to be subsidized there at his former lifestyle. No such luck.

Hopefully, clean-er elections will take place in 2020.

The Chiquitanía fires

There are important things, then there are immediate things. Like, the tree right in front of you that does not let you see the forest.

The forest out of view, out of sight, out of mind, *that happens to be burning*. Ultimately to profit our big business and allow our over consumption, through middlemen that clean appearences, not even benefiting the arsonists themselves that much.

For this metaphor, the *tree* that I planted in front of me was writing a book about *cartonería*. A detailed explanation. What I did, why. How I did it. Lots of data from research. Much reflection, reasoning, attempts to understand and explain. Nice, strong tree.

A tree is good, and as long as you have it there, you might as well pay attention to it, but a tree is, *should* be, just part of a whole, of a forest, of an ecosystem.

In the middle of *minding my tree*, a major disaster has been taking place.

If you ever are going to use the word *catastrofa*, it is now, when you talk about peasants burning virgin forest of the Chiquitanía in Bolivia, totally on purpose.

That *matters.*

Can you help? At least pay some attention? Please?

Peace, to you and yours.

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I use free, legal, shared software for my work, including this book, which I expect to release for free in five years. *The worker deserves his wages*, yet, if this book is any good, it should be available long after it is no longer sold.

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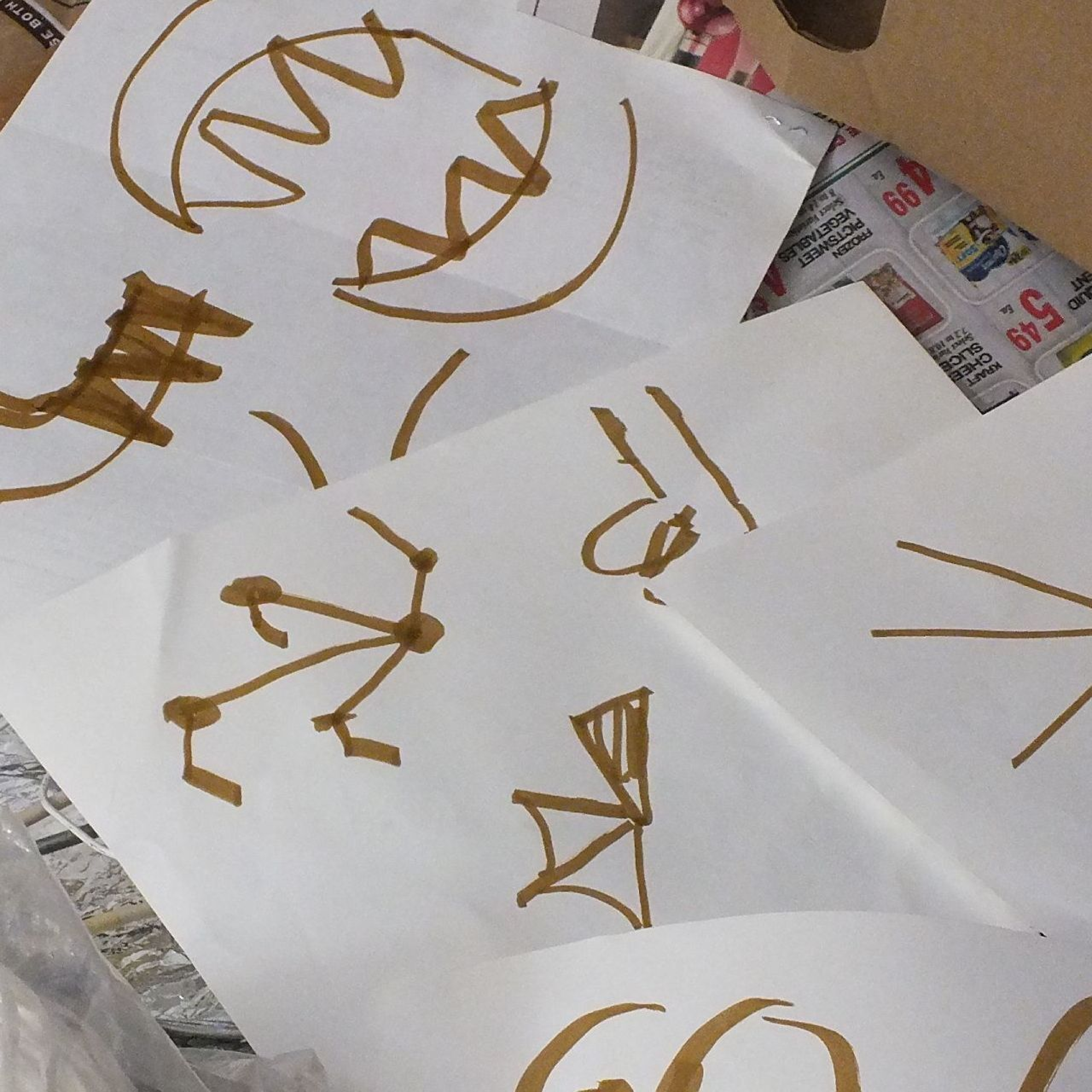

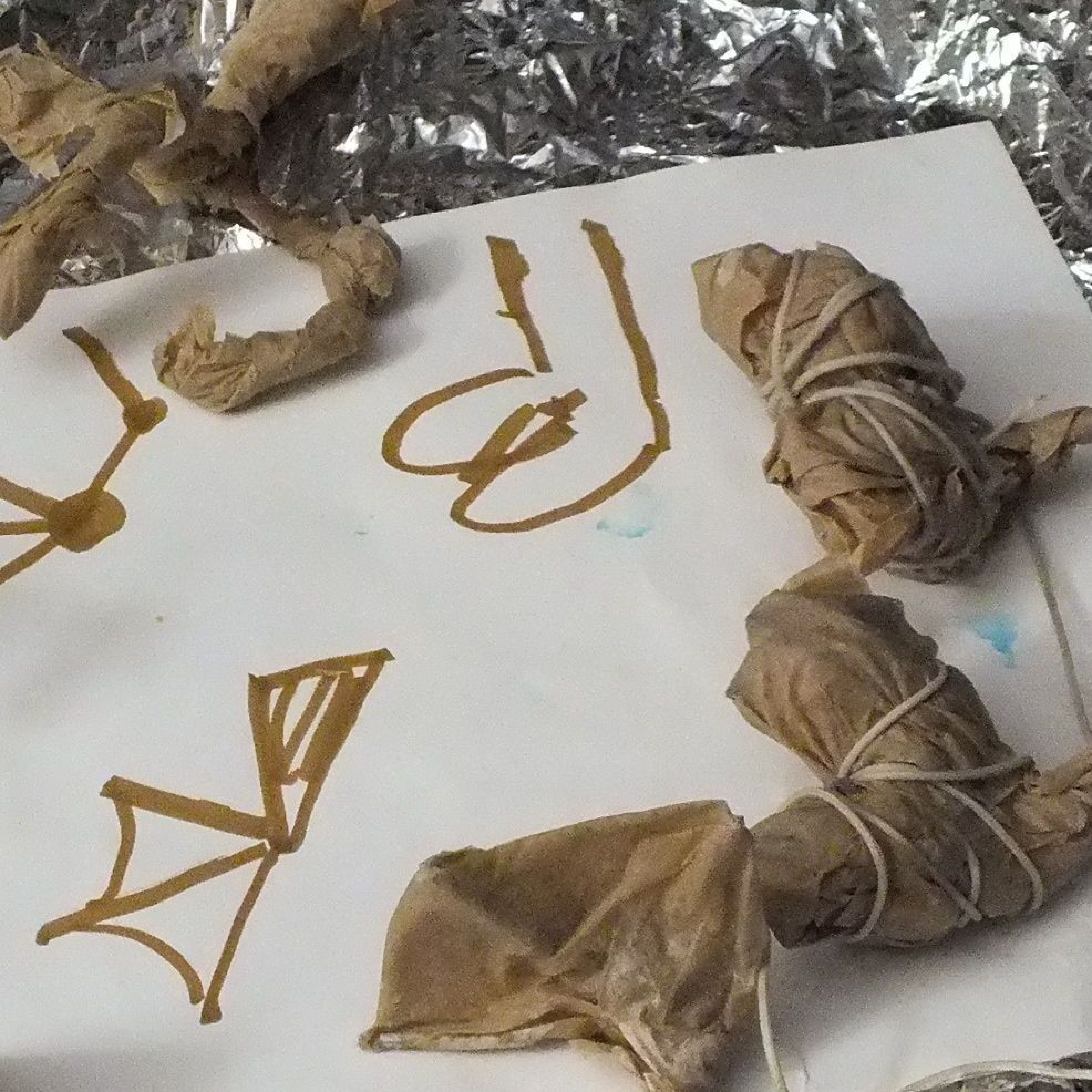

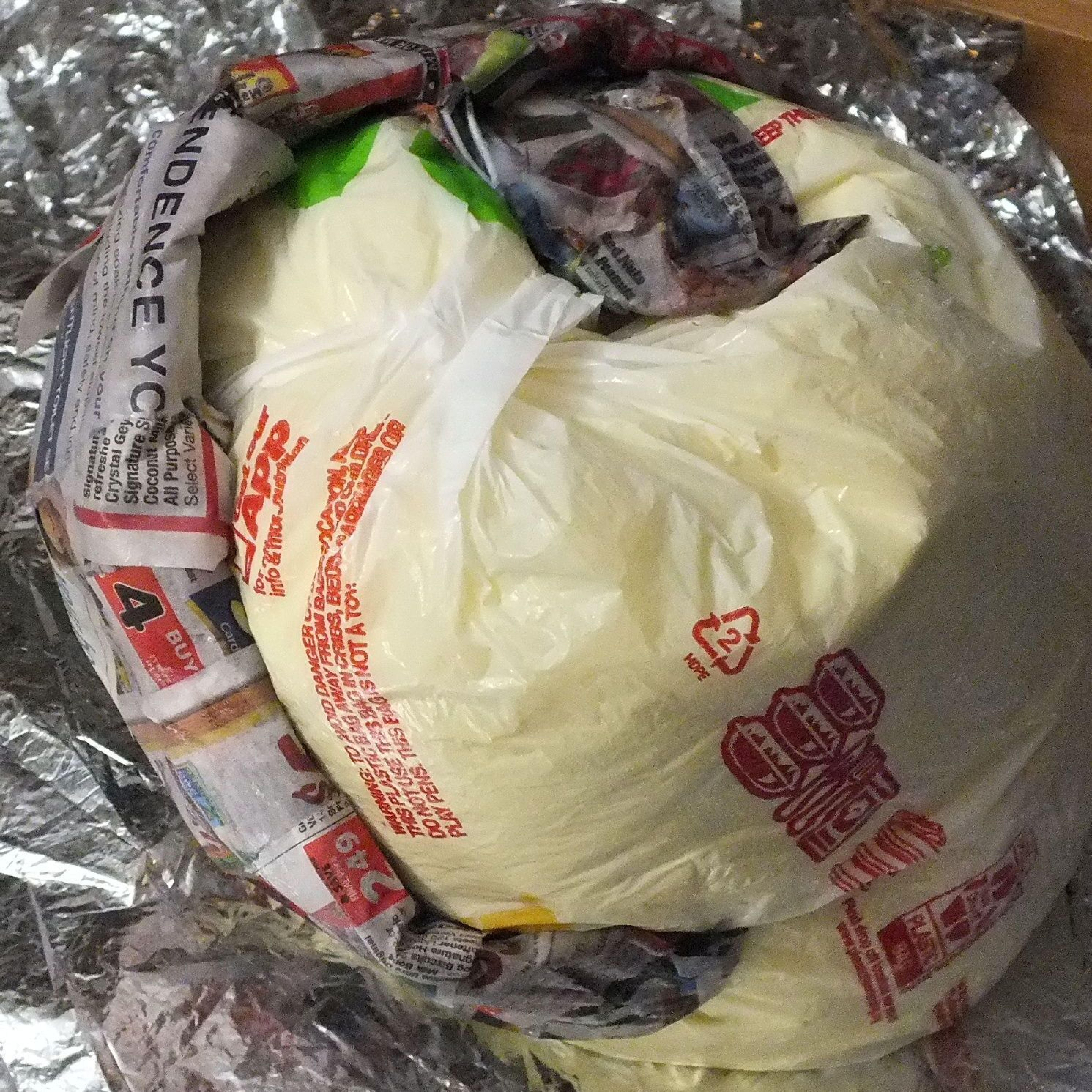
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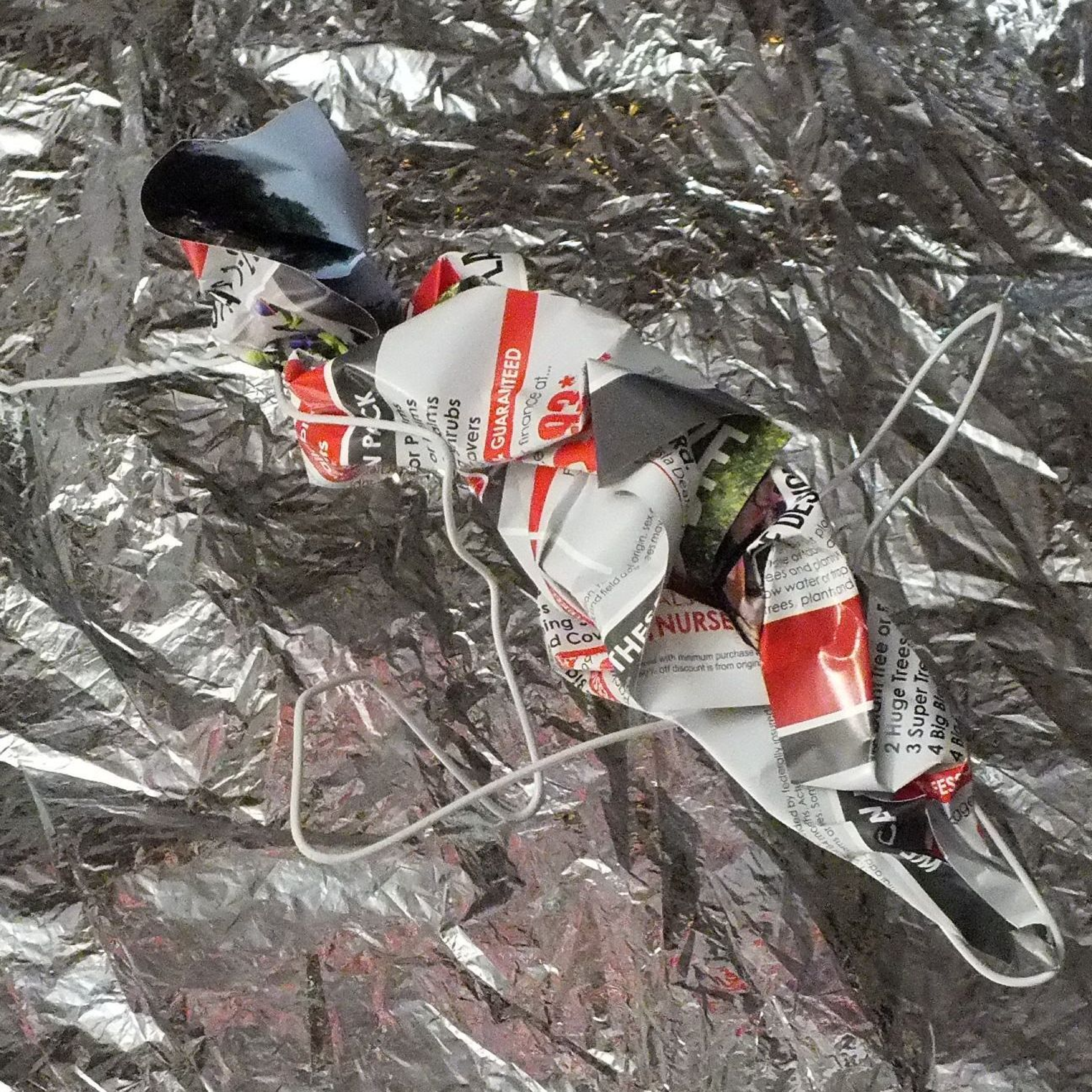
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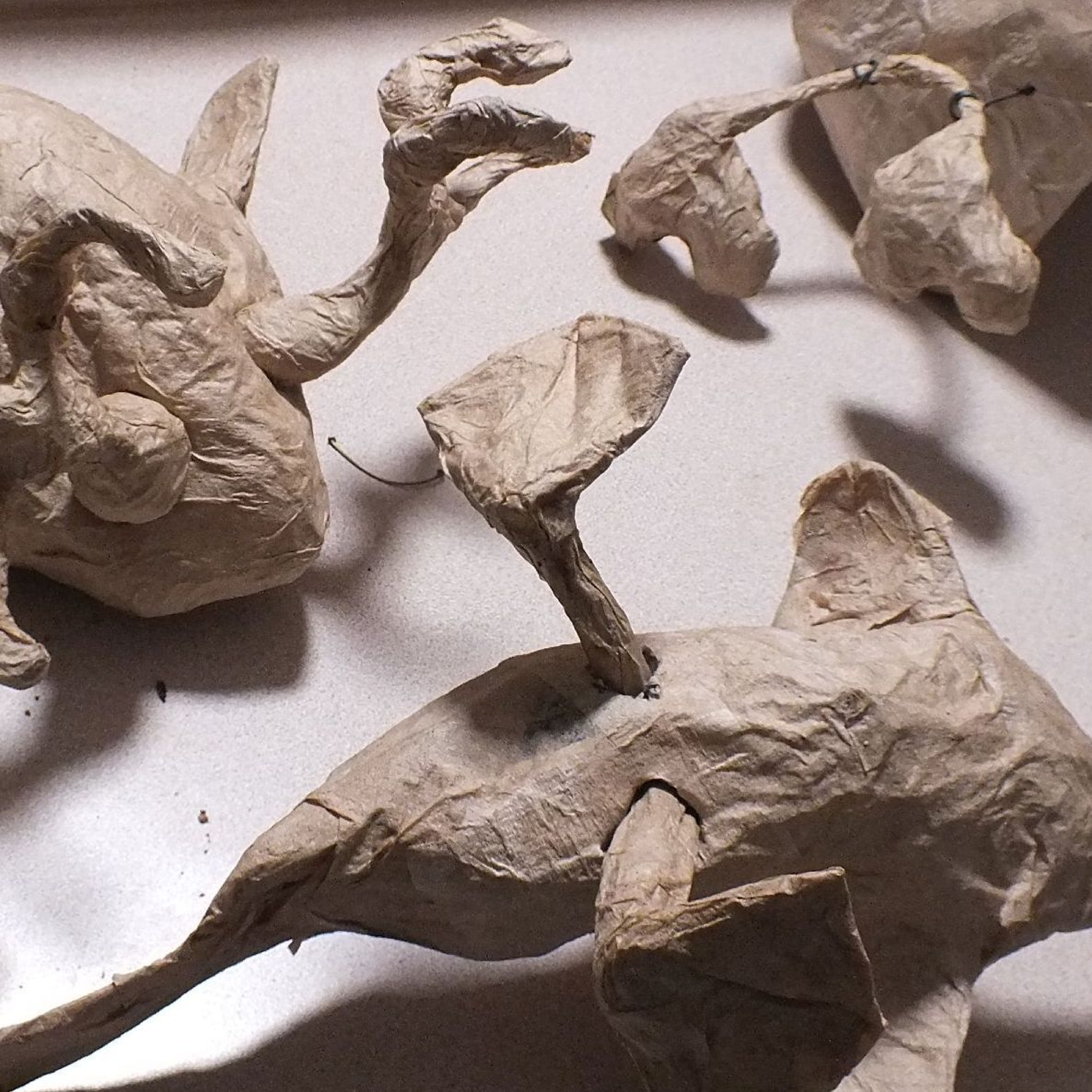

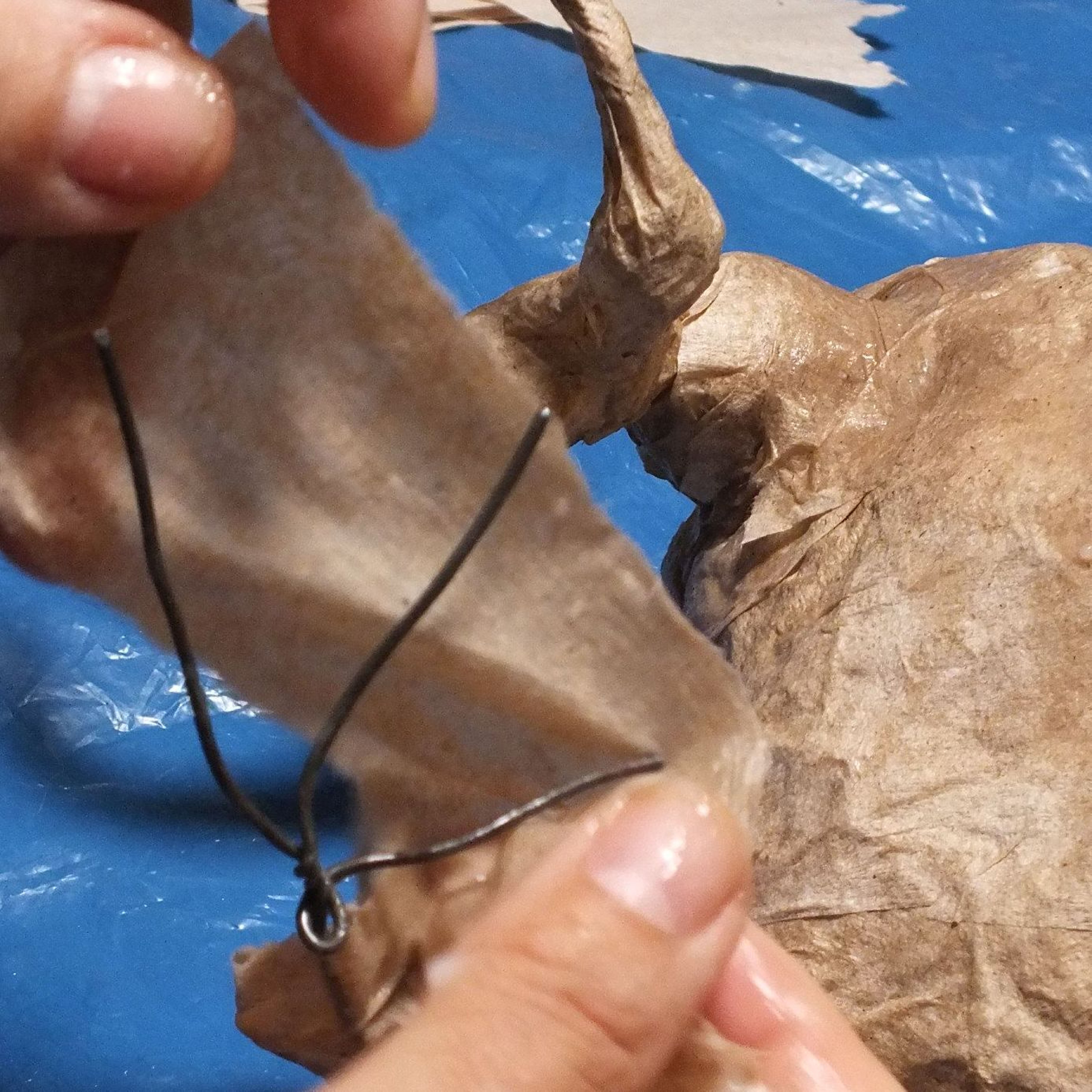

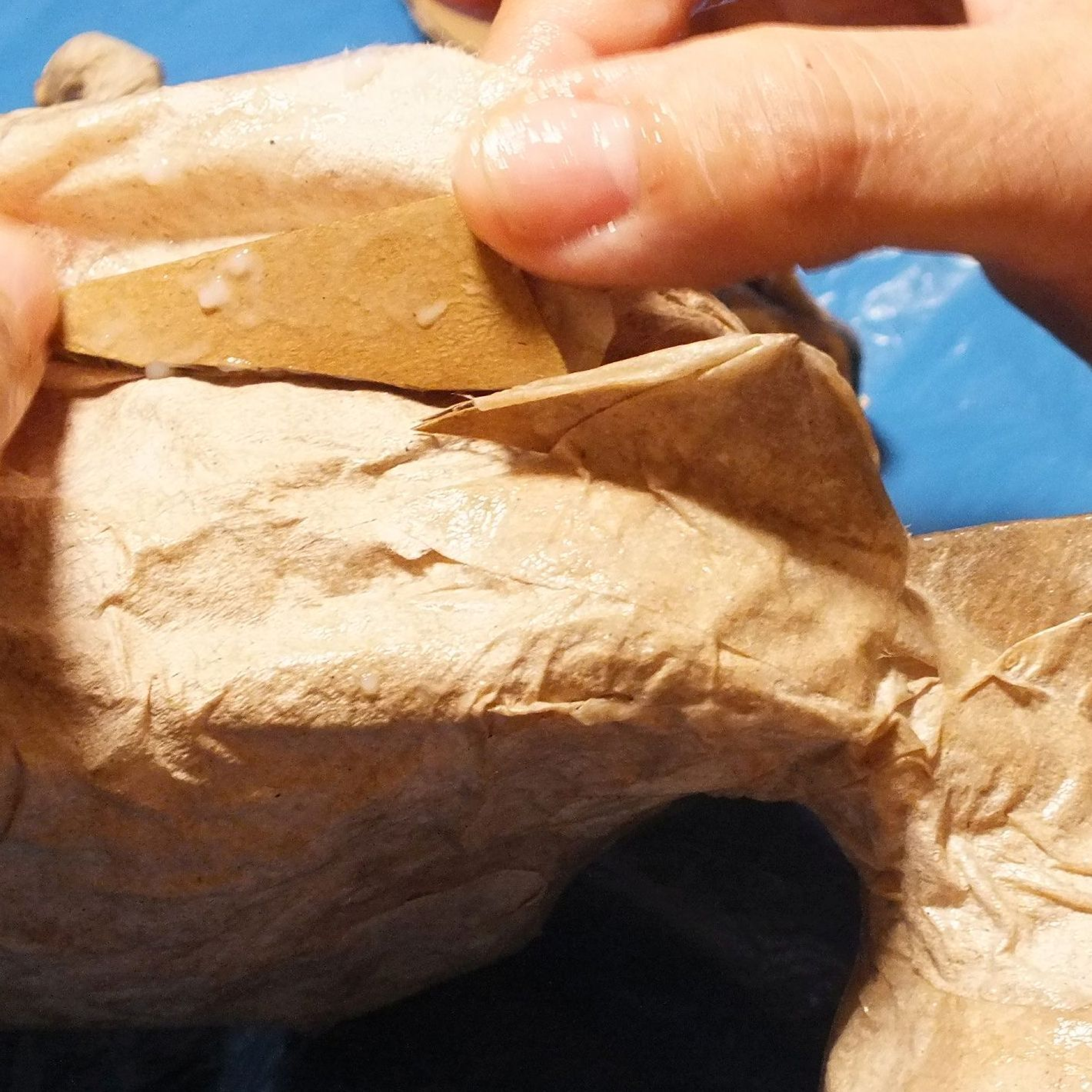

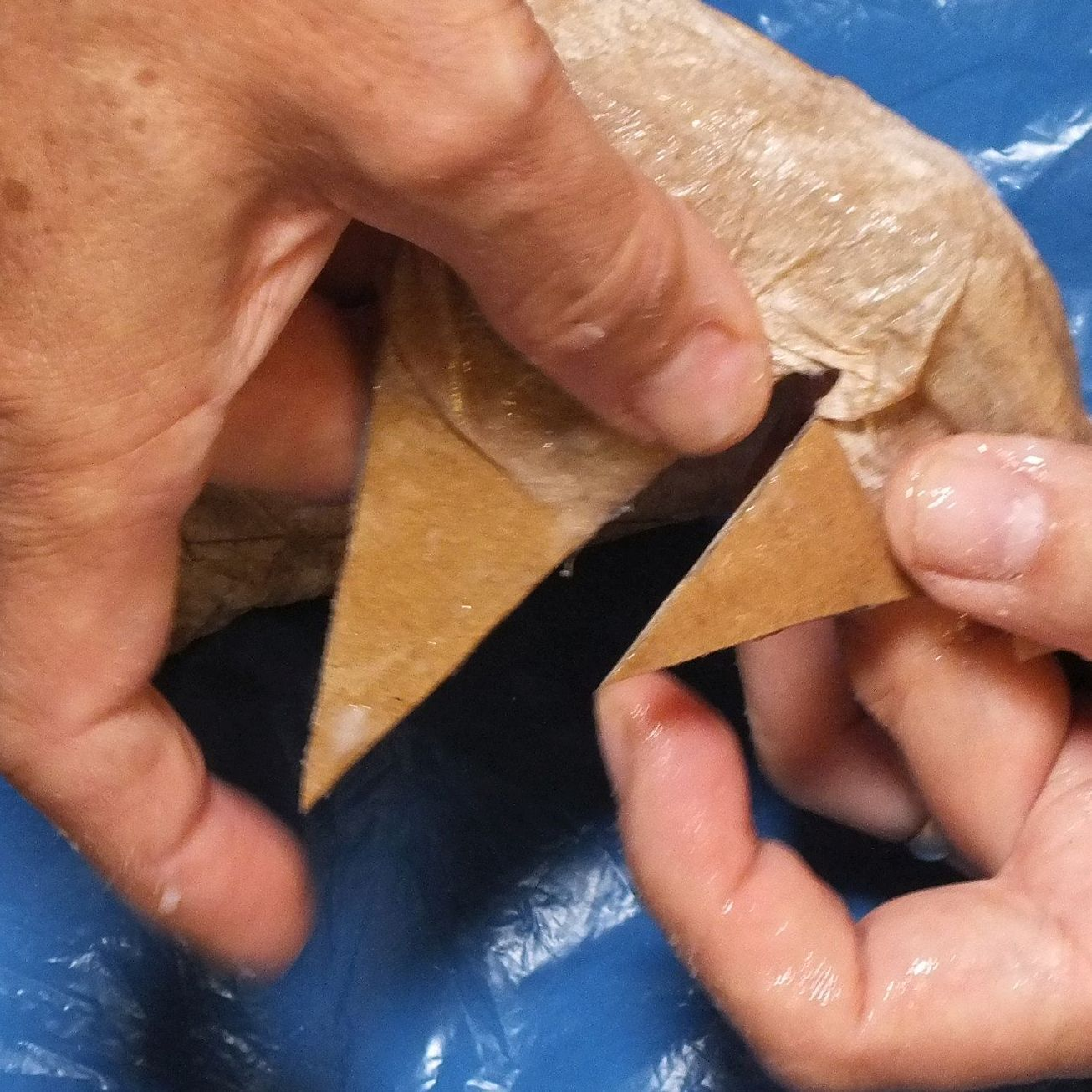

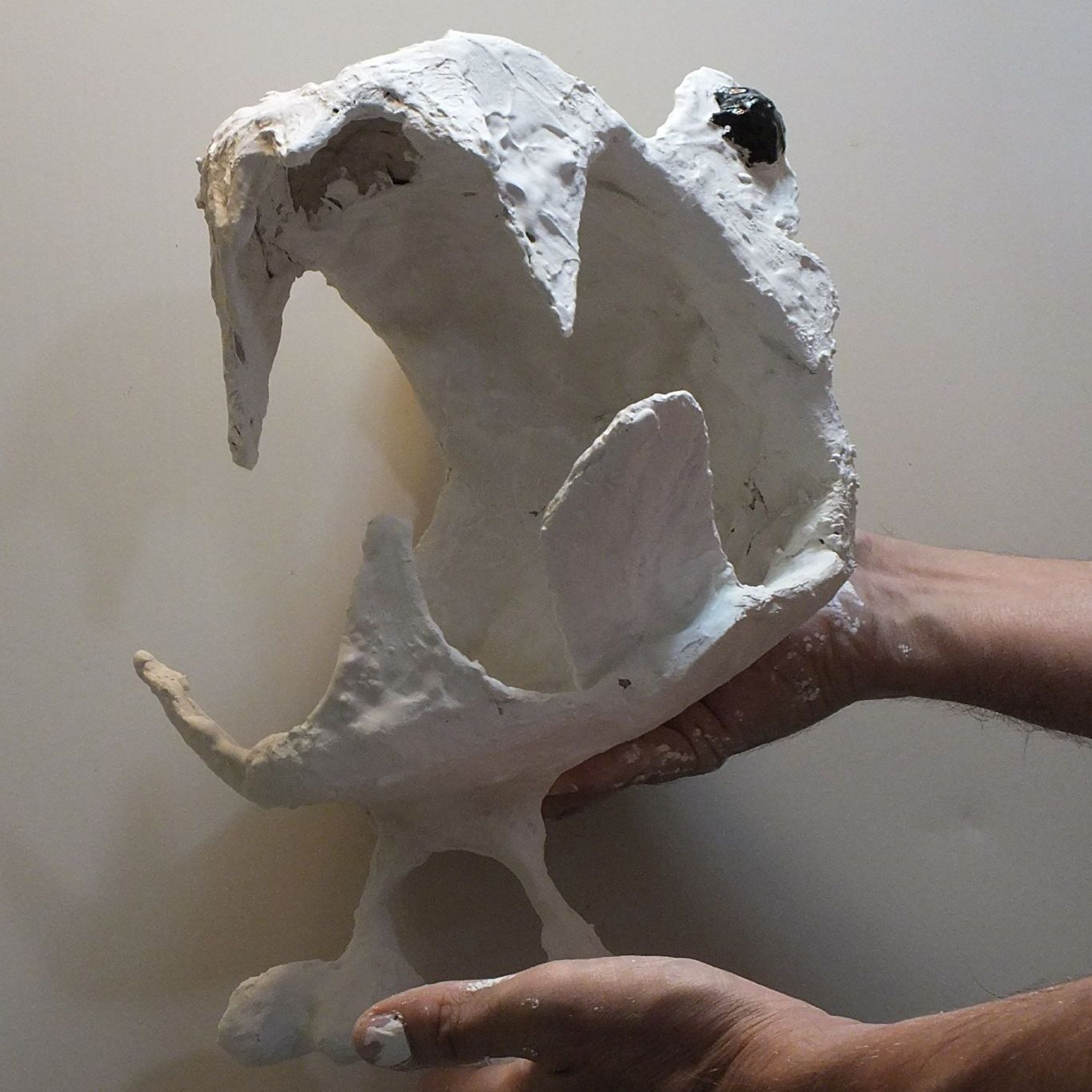

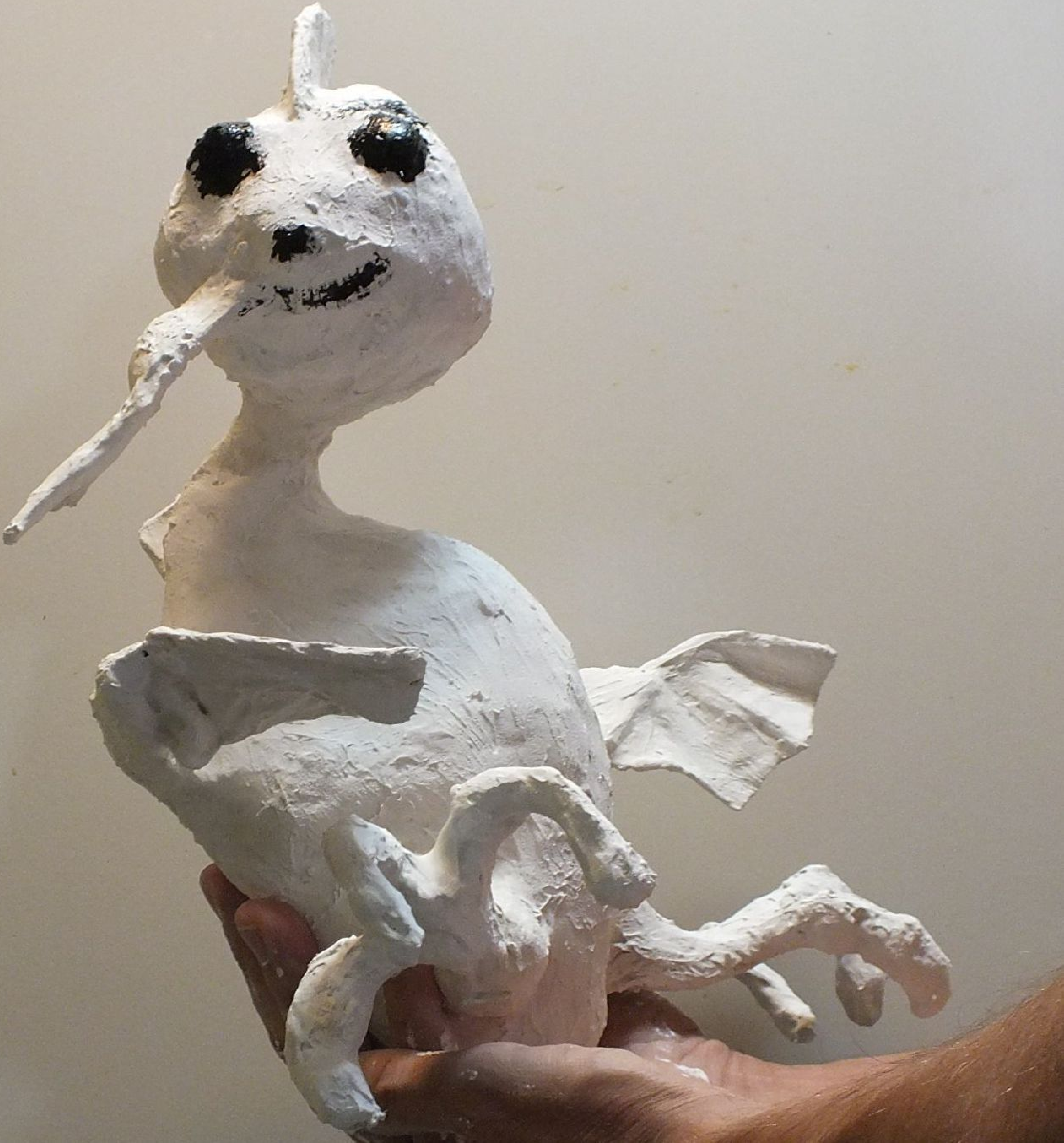

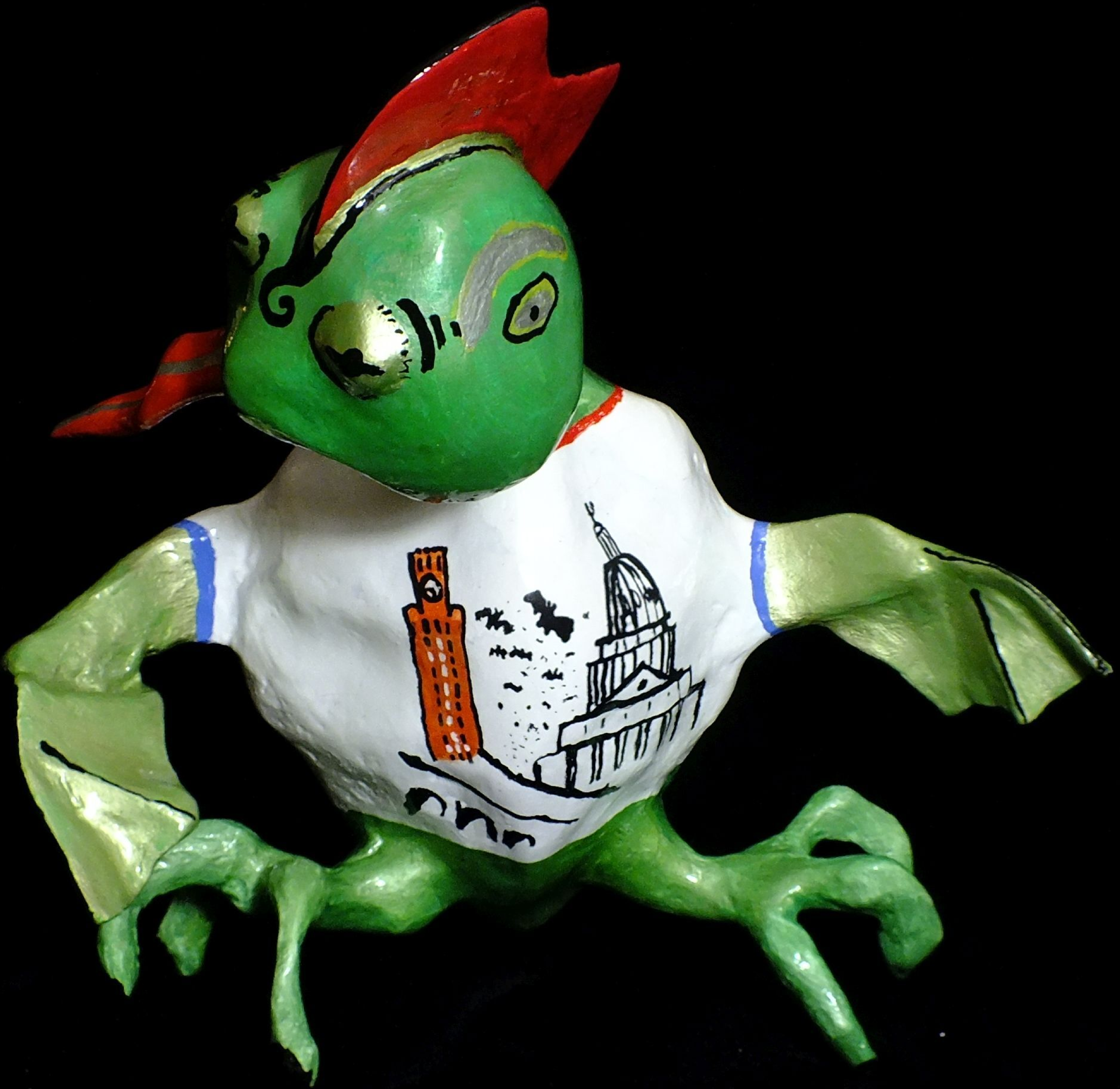

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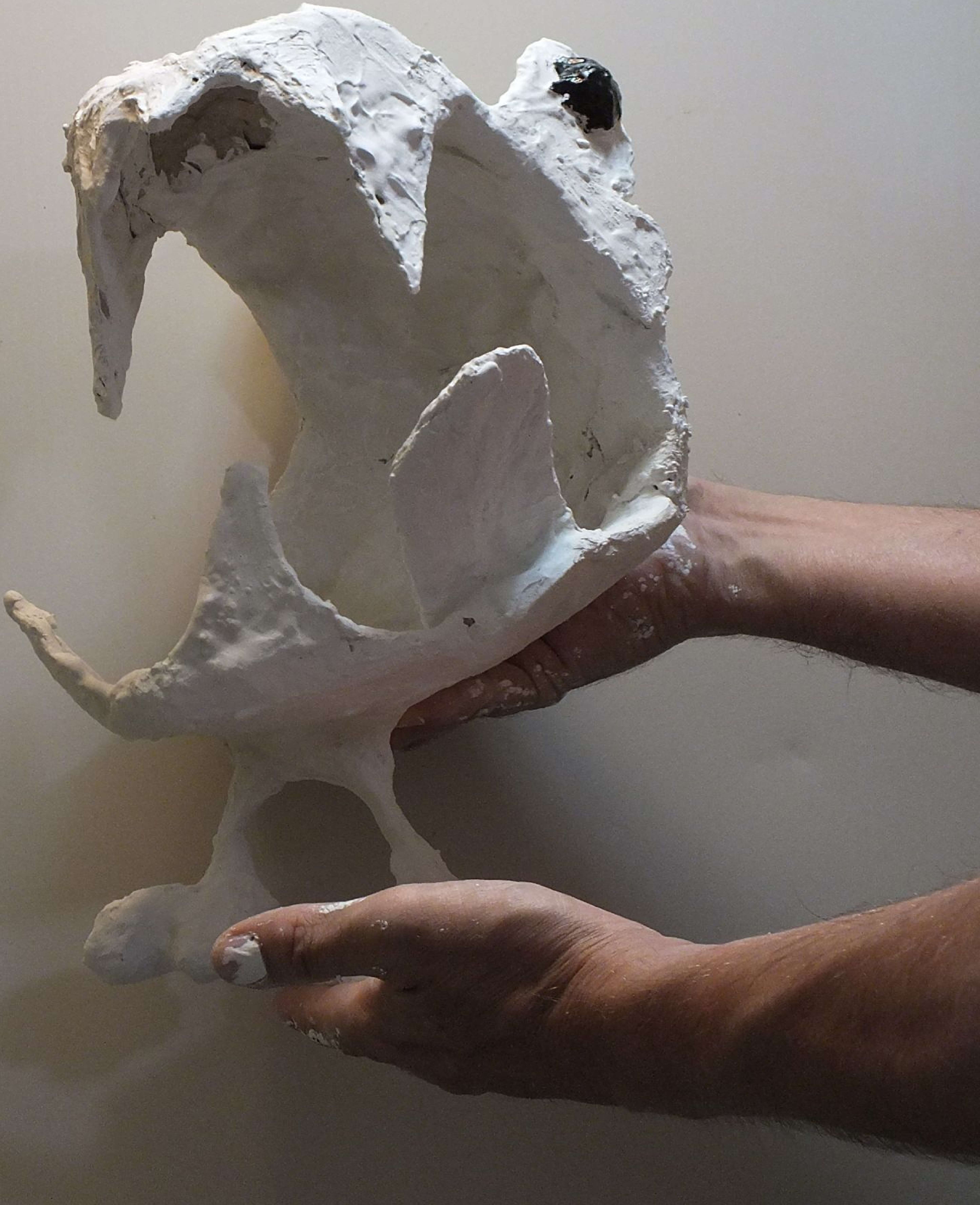

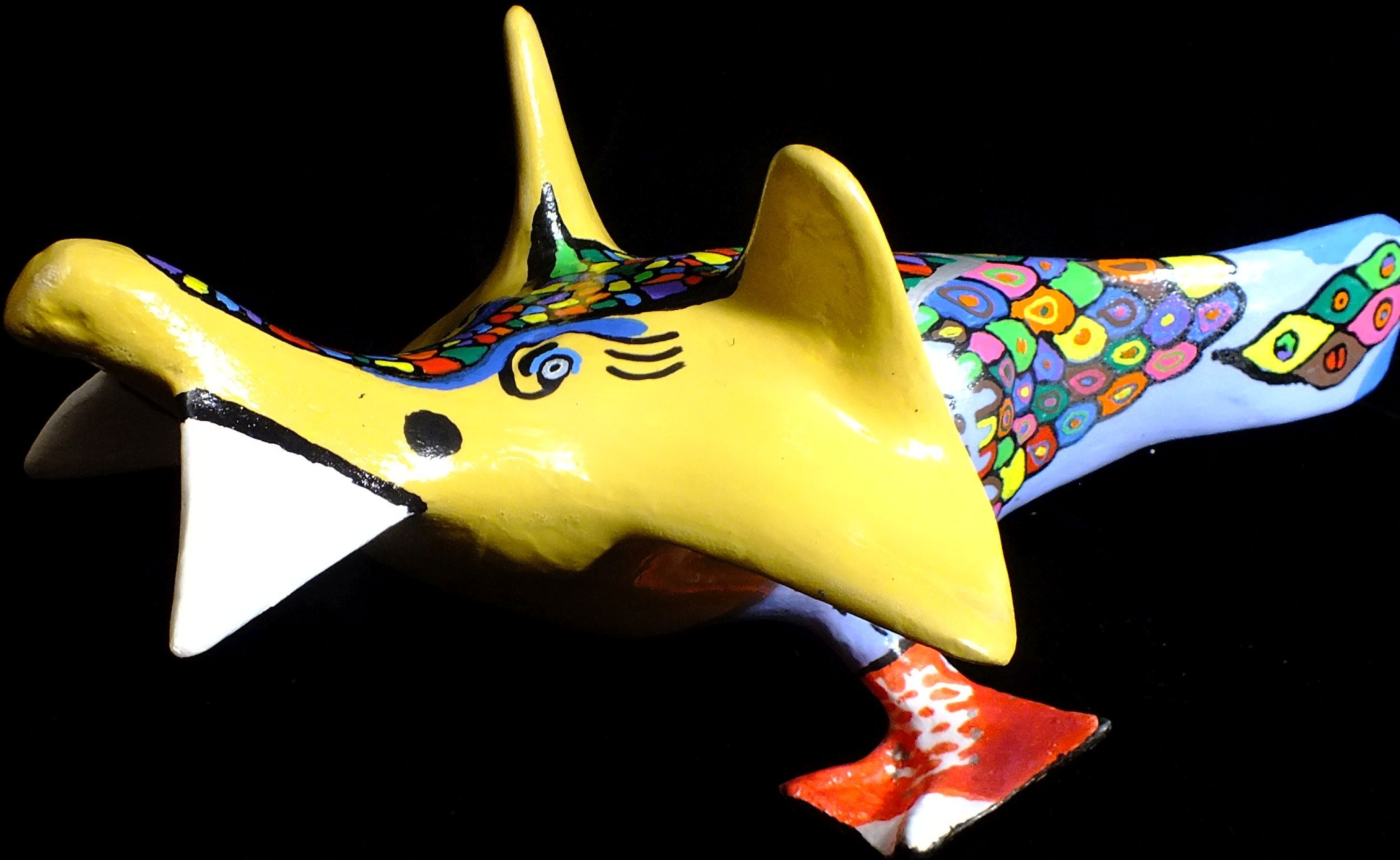

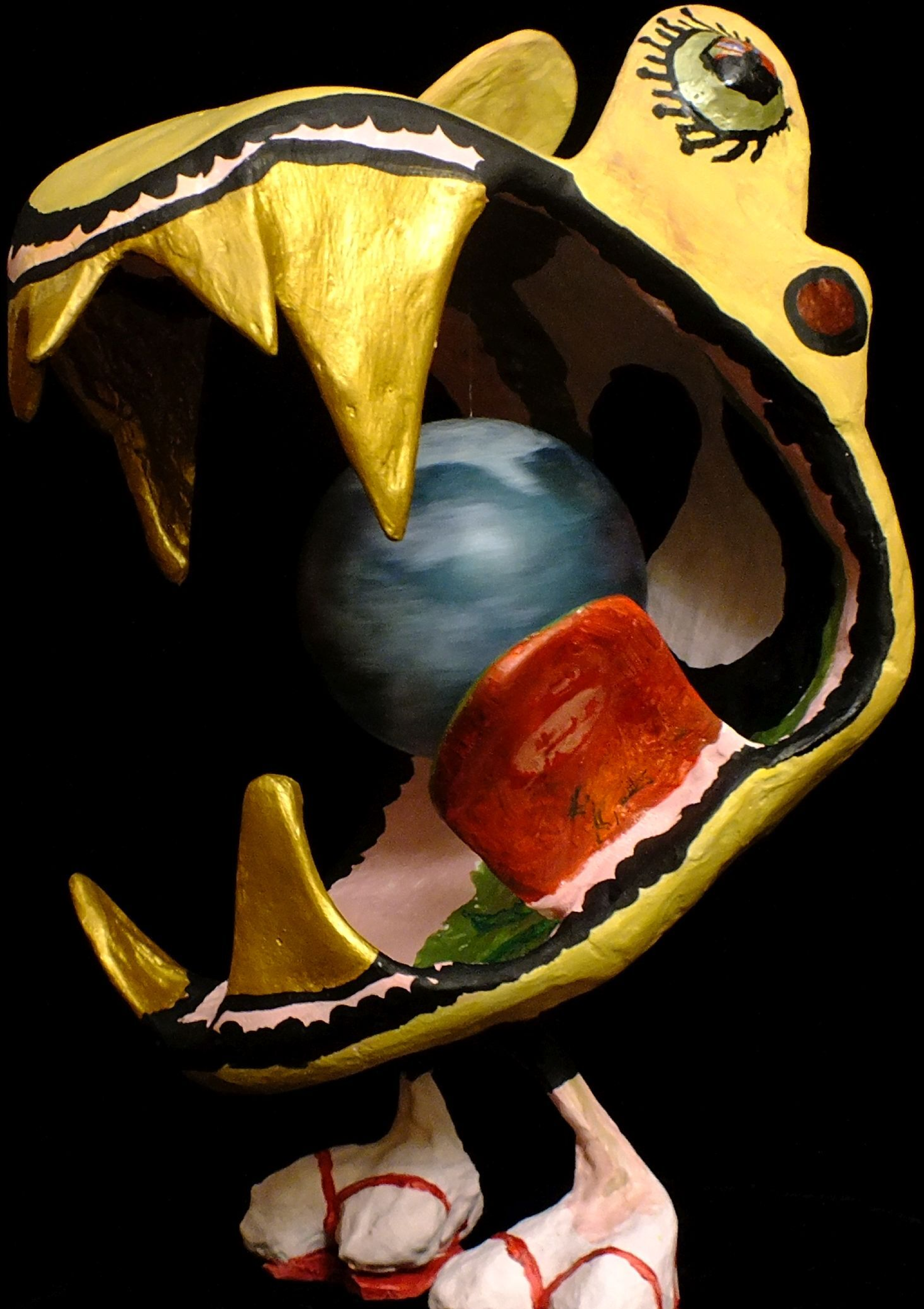

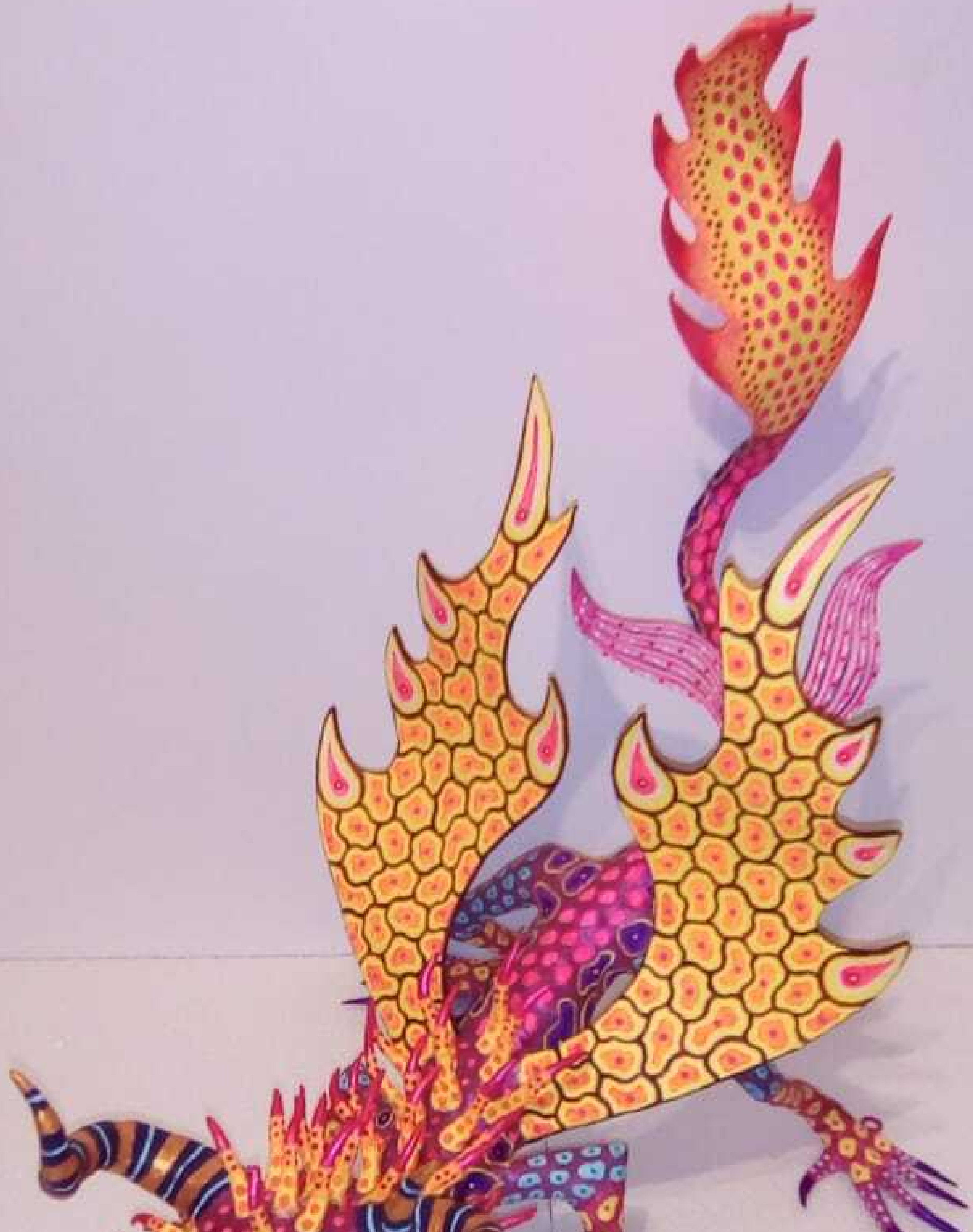

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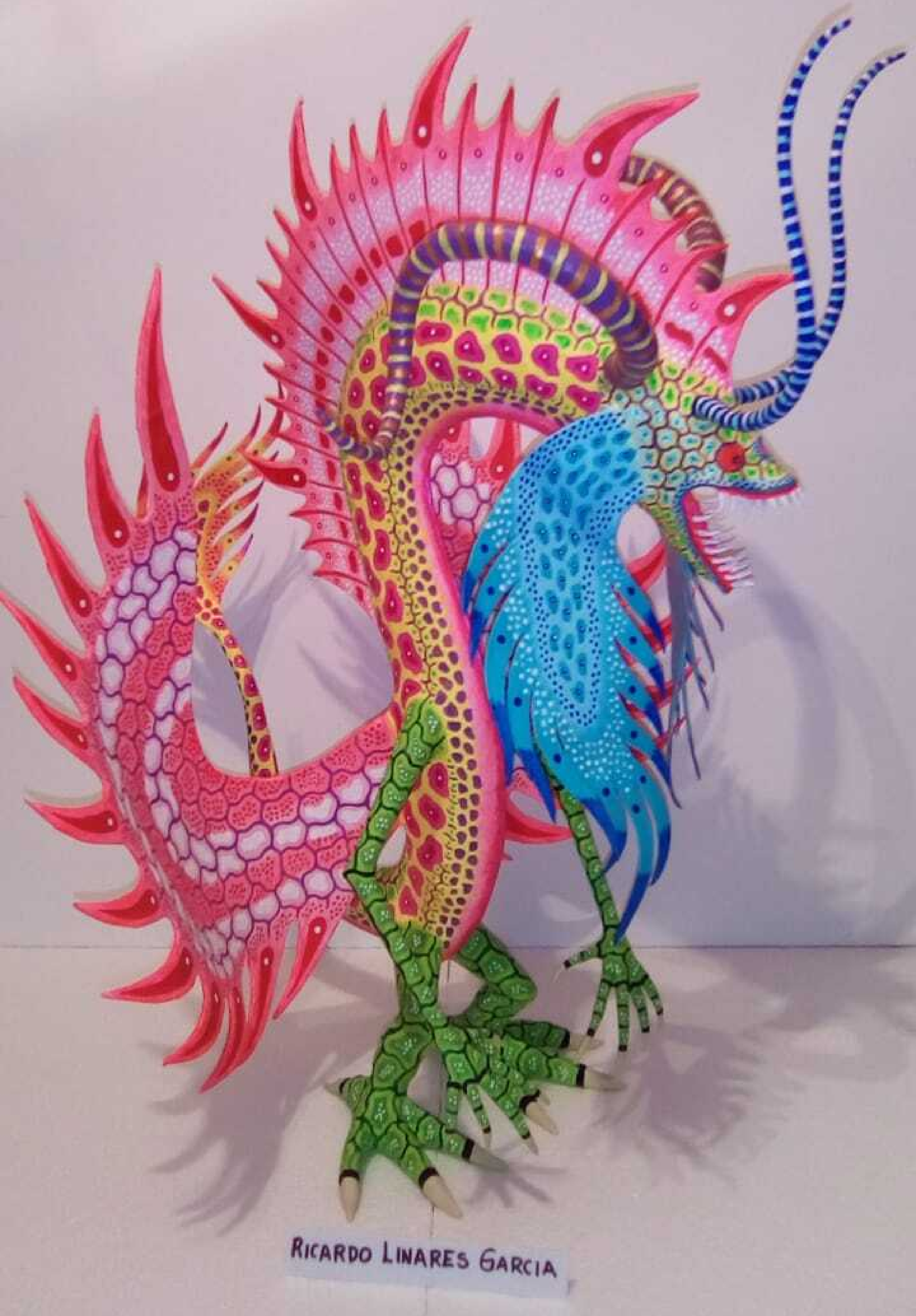

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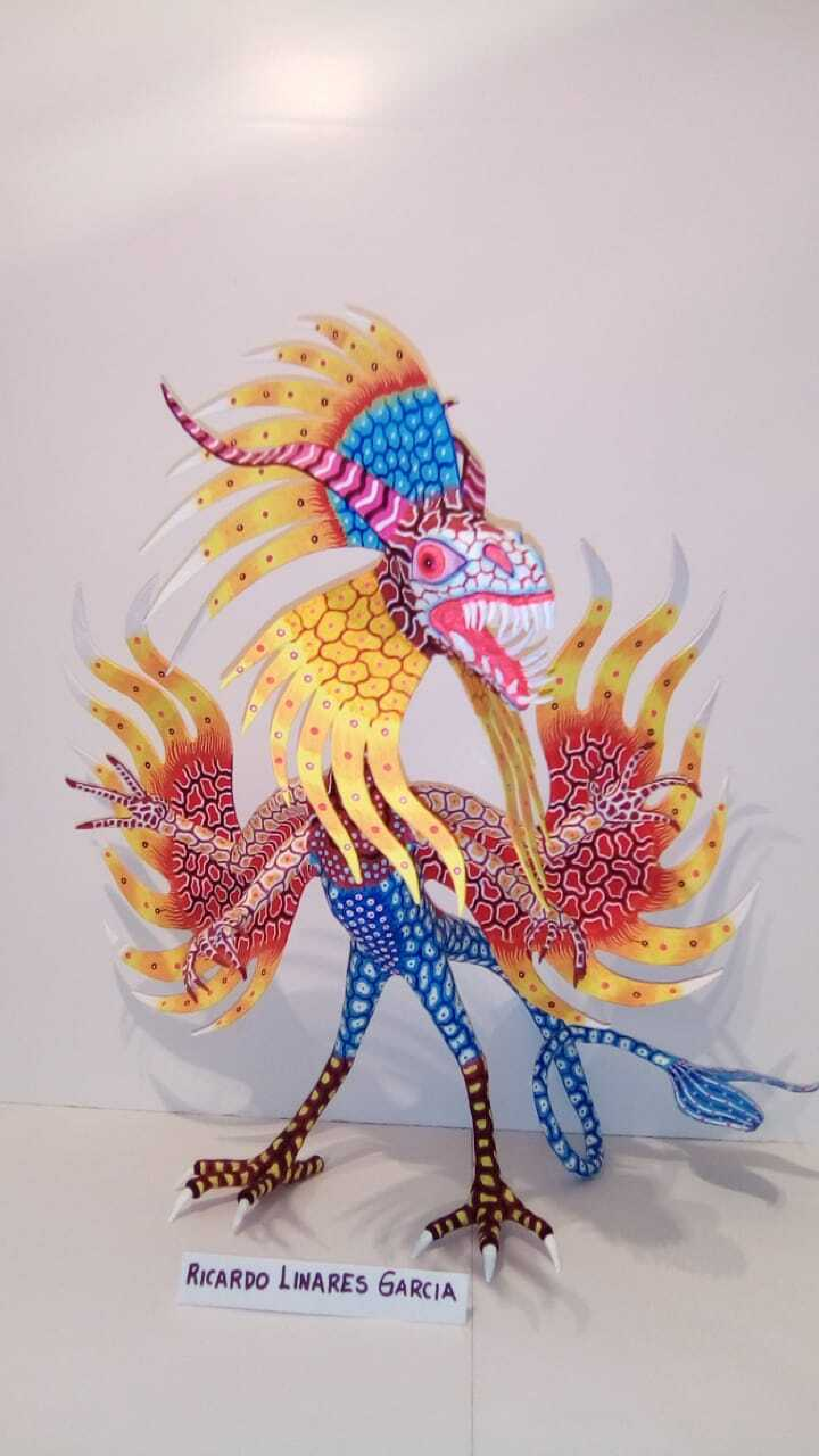
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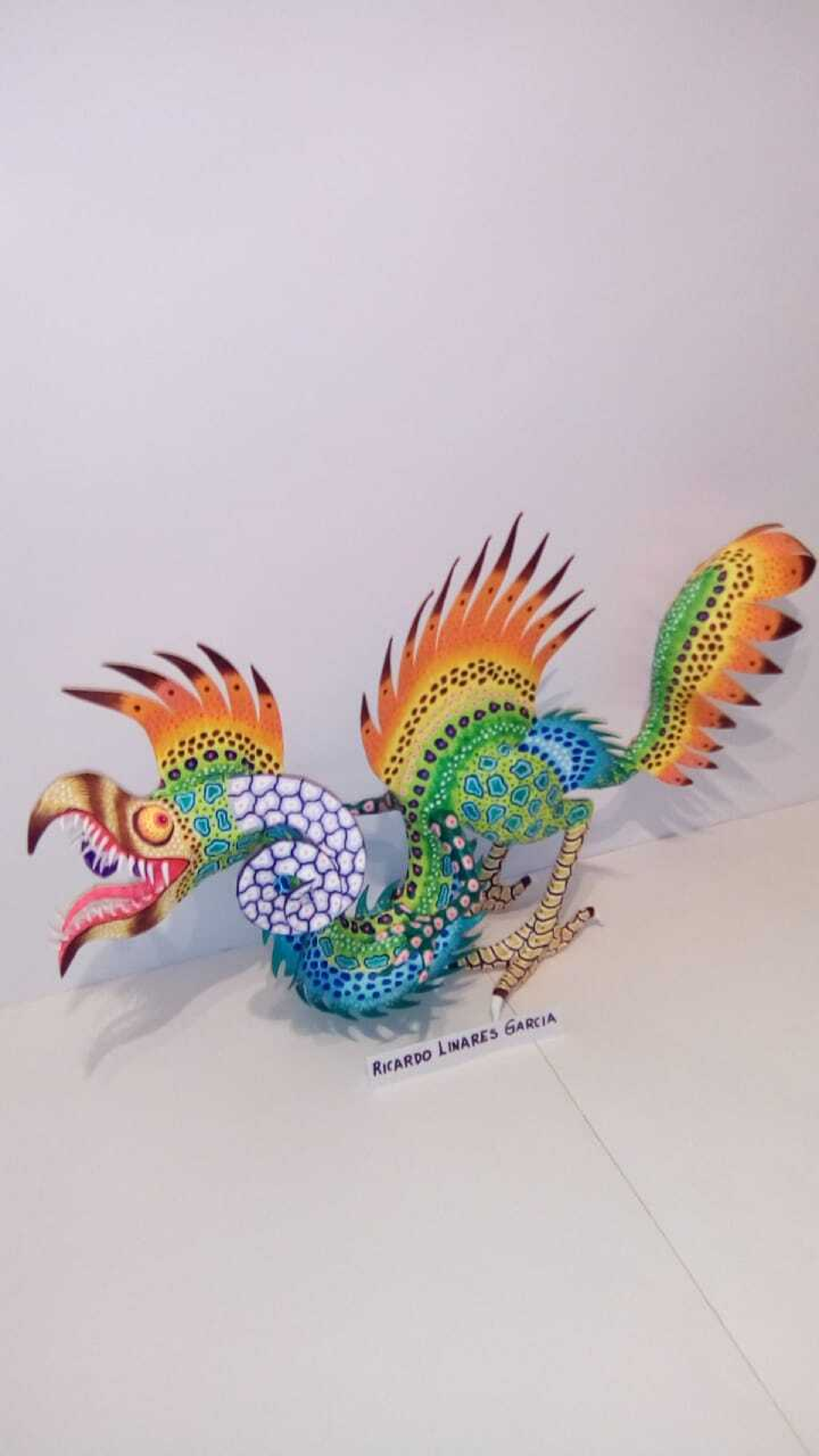
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